



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევითი ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**ON THE NEED FOR REFORMING
SCHOOL EDUCATION IN GEORGIA**

NATELA SAKHOKIA

EXPERT OPINION



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The cultural, social, economic development of Georgia, the conservation of its natural and cultural heritage, and the strength of its political and defence systems are directly connected with the existence of an educated society and professional personnel. As school represents the most important and, one might say, principal institution in a state, it is in fact the modern state that is responsible for the status of the country's school system.

Almost every country in the world has undertaken some form of school system reform in the past 50 years, but very few have succeeded in improving their systems. Therefore, the outstanding scholars and experts of the 21st century have considered and analyzed the few successful school reforms methodically and carefully. As a result, the world has filled this gap in knowledge and understanding. The division of successful school systems according to starting conditions – from poor to fair, from fair to good, from good to great, from great to excellent - was found to be useful for conducting consistent and systematic analysis of reforms. The main finding of this research is that, despite their different geographical, cultural or political contexts, the school systems with identical starting conditions should adopt a set of similar interventions, while direct transfer of operational characteristics of school systems at higher stages of development to reform a school system at a lower stage categorically should not be allowed¹. As the outstanding world expert in education system management Michael Fullan states: *This report is invaluable for policy makers and school system leaders who are or should be crafting a roadmap for improving their specific systems. It furnishes a powerful analytical tool... It will stimulate a wave of further whole system reform efforts.*²

The below recommendations for improving the school system of Georgia are based on the recent analysis of the experience of successful school system reforms and its conclusions.

Main directions of the school system reform strategy of Georgia

Today, Georgia's school system can be assessed as poor. All signs characteristic of such a system are present: student attendance level is low and the truancy is high;³ the system's teachers and school administration have low levels of qualification and motivation;⁴ no level of education

management, including the highest, has sufficient potential; the quality of schools within the system varies greatly; the resources, both human and financial, are limited.

Our school system has all these characteristics, although the size of these problems in the system is also important. We agree that the qualification of teachers is low, but the situation revealed by the qualification testing of teachers held in summer 2015 is alarming and catastrophic. How can a system work, where 95 percent of the tested primary school teachers fail to overcome the minimum threshold⁵? This most recent data indicates that most of our children will fail to master the learning material in the primary classes, prepare for the next stage of school, or even properly form the motivation to learn. Thus, they will be likely to develop inferiority complexes and drop out of school for a long time, if not for ever.

The main obstacle to initiating transformation is that the group of potential leaders lacks the courage to overcome inertia and perform a critical revision of status-quo majority views. Leaders should have the capacity to make complex decisions on starting the comprehensive reform and bring together like-minded persons to coordinate the creation of policy documents reflecting the initial primary directions and facilitate the process of reviewing and approving these documents by experts, educational personnel, and the general public. The group of leaders should define priorities that **do not give rise to doubts and are not subject to revision** and find resources for their implementation.

We shall deal in detail with the state of the policy documents review. In general, implementation of the state policy, especially of the social policy, will not be successful unless the people towards whom the policy is directed understand its essence and/or agree with it. A critical mass of people should be established who not only share the reform ideas but are also aware of the directions of its implementation. These people should also understand that implementation of the complex transformation will necessarily bring forth problems and be prepared to cope with them. Four types of interest and knowledge should be involved in this process:

1. Rank-and-file members of society, including not only parents, but also persons interested in the country's development;
2. Education sphere specialists, both practical teachers and administration, as well as scientists working on education problems;

3. Politicians who consider the reform in the context of the country's general development and prioritize it appropriately. Agreement among representatives of different parties on the socio-political aspects of the reform will create conditions safeguarding sustainable management and continuity of the reform process;⁶
4. Social design experts, who will be responsible for elaborating the methodological bases of the reform process.

Public consideration of the educational policy documents in our country is one of the most important aspects of state development. Together with the establishment of a modern state in Georgia, the process of a modern nation state formation is under way. "Nation is the unity of the people perceiving themselves as sharing the same fate."⁷ Since the educational reform is the issue that concerns all citizens of the country, involving individuals in the reform process and giving them the feeling that their opinion has been heard and taken into account facilitates the process of formation of true citizens. This is especially important for our country, given its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature.⁸

Essence of the principal intervention to be carried out in the school system of Georgia

When a country faces an acute economic, social and political crisis, the state central government shall assume not only the primary responsibility, but a more hands-on approach to governance. For example, the history of the United States of America knows many such instances: Roosevelt's economic policy during the Great Depression, his unprecedented support of American private universities, and the implementation of monetary interventions by presidents Bush and Obama in the banking sector. Similar examples can be cited from the history of many countries of the world.

Global experience in implementing school system reforms demonstrates the validity of this approach. When the school education system finds itself in a critical state and when the country is conscious that the wellbeing of its citizens is under threat, the central government will assume the responsibility and, correspondingly, the reins of government. When the education system is in a critical state, middle management, school administration and teachers alike are provided with a strictly defined, well-articulated and realistic action plan. ***Each and every*** example of a country's (or region's) successfully reformed school system has used this

core approach. The more problematic the system, the lower the level of professionalism at all levels of management, and therefore the more responsibility is shouldered by the central authority.

The dynamics of successful school reforms in the world (Finland, Singapore, Ontario (Canada), the State of Massachusetts and Long Beach (U.S.A.), Hong Kong, Minas Gerais (Brazil), Poland, Slovenia, etc.)⁹ are as follows: the center attentively observes the educational process (assesses student performance), and only when student performance stably improves does the difference between strong and weak students as well as between schools begins to reduce, and the delegation of responsibility and decision-making starts to take place on lower levels – among middle management, school administration and teachers. When the professionalism of teachers and the system improves as a whole, management from the center is carried out in the form of general free instructions.¹⁰ The center then begins to promote teachers' creative and innovative activities, since this is regarded as the main driver of progress in school systems.

Thus, at the current stage, the Ministry of Education of Georgia should assume full responsibility of the educational system, desist from shifting responsibility to lower structural units, and ensure enforcement of its own directives and decisions at all levels. Where a decision to delegate responsibility to a lower structural unit is made, the process should be closely monitored.

We understand that there is a possibility for the government to develop a temptation to retain centralized management of the system after it is no longer necessary¹¹. In order to safeguard against this, progressive authorities together with stakeholders should, when the system improves to a given level (which can be objectively measured), start to gradually loosen the reins of centralized management and transfer responsibilities to lower levels.

Initial Goal and Tasks of School Reform

Goal. At the current stage, the following major targets should be set for reforming our school system:

Raising Students' Level of Literacy and Numeracy

The goal of raising students' level of literacy and numeracy is to be rapidly attained at the current stage. We repeat that, in **each and every** country

of the world where the reform was initiated and successfully completed, this was the ultimate goal in order to ensure that future generations would not start life without vital elementary skills.¹² The task of attaining this goal should serve as a basis for reallocating the available resources.¹³

Tasks. To achieve basic literacy and numeracy, the following tasks must be solved:

- Raising qualification and motivation of low-skilled teachers and school administration;
- Bringing up all schools to the minimum quality standard;
- Increasing access to school for each student.

Let us consider each of the tasks:

Raising Qualification and Motivation of Low-skilled Teachers and School Administration

The professional level and qualification of the majority of Georgia's teachers is unsatisfactory, therefore it must be urgently aided. The school plan and program should be disaggregated into individual lessons; the teacher should be provided with scripted lessons.¹⁴ This defines the target, plan, method and teaching material of each lesson, which enables the teacher to correctly "perform" the lesson. That is, the teacher will be provided with the established, binding form of conducting a lesson. The teacher should therefore find the teaching process easier¹⁵. The proposed scripted lessons may not be perfect at the initial stage, but should be constantly improved on the basis of an analysis of the incoming results. In addition, it should be always be kept in mind that the teacher is not just a technical worker, but a person capable of creative activity even under such conditions.

There is a risk that many teachers would prefer such a situation that does not require special effort or creativity on their part and thus will mechanically follow the beaten track. In order to counteract this tendency, in parallel to the system recovering from its critical situation, mechanisms of encouraging initiative and innovations among teachers should be designed and introduced.

Those teachers that from the very outset are against the use of scripted lessons for their classes, should be allowed to conduct the teaching process according to their own plan and methods. However, in this case

they should assume responsibility for the performance of their students, which should be periodically checked. Such an approach will prevent the formation of feelings of distrust or restriction among the teachers corps, which could develop into latent opposition to the reform. It should be mentioned that in many countries scripted lessons were mandatorily introduced.¹⁶ However, given the local cultural context of Georgia, we believe such a strict approach to be unwarrantable.

Following the development of new curricula and scripted lessons, teacher training should be established according to this new reality. Training periods should be fixed. Political decisions should be taken to standardize the form of teacher participation in training. The ideal combination of mandatory and voluntary approaches should be identified. The training should be carried out only in the form of a seminar/workshop. The trainers should work with teachers in classrooms as well. Use of multimedia systems has been shown to greatly add to the improvement of school systems, such as by recording and distributing exemplary lessons.

In order to review problems with school administration and teachers and conduct on-site observation of the teaching process, the center should conduct visits which will serve as an incentive for enhancing motivation and quality performance.

The amount of training time allotted to a student for mastering a specific subject must be revised. The approach: *There are no children with fixed possibilities; simply, some children are slow to learn* is becoming more and more popular in the world, and many new global methods have been approved.¹⁷ The Georgian educational system must make its own choice.

The issue of professional staff is central to implementing these changes. Scientists, experienced administrators and teachers, professional education managers, retrained central employees, and management organization specialists should be mobilized throughout Georgia.

Bringing Up All Schools to the Minimum Quality Standard

The attainment of this task will require:

- Firstly, reform so as to ensure the minimum level of knowledge is attainable by pupils in all schools.
- Regular (e.g., once every 3-4 month) student knowledge assessment;
- Generation of a database for monitoring student progress.

To implement the three tasks referred to above, Georgia avails of the institutional and human resource of the National Examinations and Assessment Center. This institution is involved in the introduction of a system of universal assessment at schools. The assessment system will be designed so as to allow the correction of the teaching process as necessary.

A special commission shall assess the infrastructure, potentialities and resources of schools in order to bring them up to at least the adequate minimum standard.

All schools shall be provided with textbooks and training visual aids.

Targeted aid to very weak schools shall be carried out.

Aid to specific schools should be planned based on real finances and other resources. For example, in the beginning, schools located in mountain villages or regions inhabited with ethnic minorities can be aided.¹⁸

Increasing Access to School For Each Student

Access to school implies not only providing direct access to the training process, but also meeting a pupil's various basic social needs (nutrition, health, clothes, transport, sanitary condition in a school, etc.). The situation needs to be analyzed and these basic needs shall be adequately met.

Necessary Interventions to the School System Reform at Any Stage of Development

As was already mentioned above, the school systems with identical starting conditions should adopt a set of similar interventions. There are, however, interventions that should be implemented at all stages of the school system reform, irrespective of the stage of reform to which the school is being transferred, e.g., from poor to fair, from fair to good or from good to great, etc. Such interventions should be carried out constantly in school systems at all levels of development. We list these interventions below:

- Revising standards and programs;
- Creating a standing student performance assessment system;
- Revising the teacher and school administration remuneration and incentives structure;
- Developing technical skills of teachers and administration;

- Generating databases;
- Elaborating policy documents and legislative framework;
- Institutional strengthening of the school system.

Summary

The Georgian school system is at a poor level of development. **To reform it, the precise policy required for this level should be implemented.** A specific policy and a program for its long-term implementation should be developed. These documents should become the subject of general public and professional debate. Top education management shall plan and implement this process while involving mass media, which is very important not only for the success of the educational system, but also from the standpoint of a wider state context.

The implementation of a successful school education system reform is a condition of sustainable state development and an important non-military aspect of state security.

References

1. Taking into consideration these conclusions, we can say today that the scale reform of the school education system of Georgia that started in 2000 followed the wrong path, because it was oriented toward direct transfer of the world's most successful school system practices to our school system, without taking into account the difficult starting state. This same practice took place in the school system reform of many countries besides Georgia. The outstanding educationist Sir Michael Barber writes on this topic: "It is the same as to start training a beginner sportsman under the Olympic champion's program."
2. How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. McKinsey & company, 2011.
3. According to the OECD Program for International Students Assessment (PISA), the performance of Georgian students essentially lags behind the average international performance scales.
4. According to official statistics, primary school teachers have the poorest results. In particular, out of 2281 tested teachers, only 90 were found competent. At the same level, 1334 teachers passed the Georgian language and literature exam, although only 175 could overcome the minimum competence level. Of 1105 practical teachers tested in elementary mathematics 194 were successful. As regards natural history, only 50 out of 522 teachers managed to pass the test.

5. It should be mentioned that this figure does not note the percentage of unqualified teachers in the whole body of teachers, since many teachers passed this test earlier.
6. For example, one of the main conditions of the Finnish school system's success is that a consensus has been achieved among the parties of different orientations – beginning with moderate left-wing social democrats and ending with liberals.
7. Merab Mamardashvili. *The Topology of Consciousness*. Tbilisi. 2011.
8. We cite the Singapore example, "The government decided to transform the educational system in order to apply it as a means of state building rather than as an instrument of economic development (Toward a Better Future. Education and Training for Economic Development in Singapore. The World Bank. 2008).
9. This data was taken from the basic research "How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better." McKinsey & Company, 2011, in which the successful school reforms of 20 countries are analyzed.
10. As regards the autonomy of teachers, the 700-page curriculum approved in the 70s took the form of a thin brochure in the 90s that exclusively defined the principal objectives. The development of detailed curricula has become the business of teachers (Irina Abuladze, *The Secret of Success of the Educational System of Finland. Mastsavlebeli* (Teacher) No. 2, 2013).
11. This took place in the Soviet educational system and caused a critical lack of initiatives and innovations in schools.
12. Ontario's new government developed a strategy aimed at improving literacy and numeracy, and to raise secondary completion levels. Of these, Ontario focused on primary literacy. (How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. McKinsey & company).
13. In England, the system reallocated the school financial and human resources in accordance with its priority on raising literacy and basic numeracy skills. (How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. McKinsey & company).
14. Scripted teaching materials (scripted lessons).
15. "Our secret weapon was the unification of lessons" – interview with a high-rank official of the Finnish school system. "Can the U.S. and other countries learn from Finland? "
16. Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland and many others.
17. This approach is named as a cornerstone of the successes achieved by the Finnish school system. The difference in the level of knowledge among pupils is the lowest in Finland. "We should not overestimate the influence of different cognitive qualities of children on the learning process. If the teaching material is so designed as to suit all the pupils and is gradually complicated, if the individual differences take into consideration time necessary for learning, the results between different children groups will not be much different. Thus, it is fundamental that teaching in the basic school is so differentiated as the different learning time becomes an integral part of the system. *The Finnish National Core Curriculum (POPS 1970, 136)*.
18. Reform in Finland started in a less populated northern part and eventually came to Helsinki.