



PROFILE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

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National Center on Education and the Economy
New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce



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America's Choice II

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The Czech Republic has one of the strongest economies and lowest poverty rates of former Soviet bloc countries in Europe. With very high rates of literacy and strong performance in math and science on international comparisons of educational achievement, the Czechs are poised to become an increasingly competitive force within the EU. Yet, their education system is still in transition. Despite significant reforms aimed at moving away from communist-style central management, the Czechs are still struggling to modernize to keep pace with the rest of the EU and the demands of a global economy. The first wave of reform has been structural; Czech schools are only beginning to wrestle with changing "old school" pedagogy and opening access to higher education to a broader sector of the population.

I. Context

The Czech Republic was established in 1993, when it split from what is now known as the Slovak Federal Republic. The former Czechoslovakia had united the two states since the end of World War I. Reunited after the war, the Czechs and the Slovaks hoped that the Soviet Union would allow them the freedom to choose their own government and that the country could act as a bridge between West and East. These hopes were short-lived, as the Soviet-led Communist Party seized power, purged reform-minded elements of the party and installed hardliner Antonin Novotny as the party chief.

In 1968, the Slovak Alexander Dubcek replaced Novotny as party chief and ushered in a brief period of political, social and economic reform. He famously tried to give socialism "a human face." Threatened by the popularity of his reforms, the Soviets and Warsaw Pact nations invaded and removed Dubcek within a year. For the next decade, reforms in Czechoslovakia stagnated. Continuing efforts to jumpstart what had once been the leading economy in Europe failed.

By the late 1970s, political reform was surfacing again. In 1977, the Charter 77 group of human rights activists was established and began to agitate for better conditions in Czechoslovakia. During this period, efforts at economic reform began again to bear fruit — exports were boosted and hard currency debt reduced — and the economy showed steady growth. New investments were made in the electronic, chemical and pharmaceutical sectors, which were industry leaders in eastern Europe by the mid-1980s. Efforts at political reform came to a head by the end of the decade. After the state police ended a peaceful student protest with violence, Civic Forum was created as an umbrella group to unite activists across the country. Vaclav Havel emerged as its leader. The Communist Party all but collapsed by the end of the year and the first free elections since 1946 were held in Czechoslovakia in 1990.

While Civic Forum succeeded at overthrowing the communist regime, it proved ineffective as a governing party. Warring factions soon emerged and the federalists like Havel were unable to contain the move towards splitting the nation in two. The Czech Republic was formed three years after the elections.

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy with a President elected by parliament. Vaclav Klaus is the current president of the Czech Republic and Vladimir Spidla is the new prime minister, representing the Social Democratic party. The parliament is divided into two chambers, an Assembly of Deputies and a Senate. The Czech Republic is organized into municipalities and 14 newly established regions with elected governors. Both have responsibility for education.

There are approximately 11 million Czechs. Poles and Romanians are the leading ethnic minorities

II. The Education System

The Czech education system is in the midst of implementing a comprehensive set of reforms. One reform strand has focused on decentralizing authority for the system. Authority for compulsory schooling and upper secondary school is now shared amongst the national Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, newly created regional authorities, municipalities and the individual schools. A new Higher Education Act gave institutions of higher education autonomy, although funding is still dispensed by the Ministry. Reforms have also aimed at improving access to education, adding a 9th year to compulsory schooling, adding new vocational/ technical programs for graduates of upper secondary school and expanding slots in higher education. The Czech Republic currently has one of the lowest rates of participation in higher education in the EU.

Governance

Under the new system, the Ministry will set the content of education for the primary and secondary school system (called framework education programs). Schools will choose curricula that meet these frameworks. New frameworks are currently being developed and will be implemented during the 2006/7 school year. Until then, schools choose curricula from a list approved by the Ministry and adhere to the education standards prescribed in 1995. Schools already have a lot of flexibility in how they organize instruction and in teaching methodology.

The Czech School Inspectorate is also part of the Ministry and is responsible for monitoring schools and school facilities, educational achievement and financial management. Municipalities are responsible for nursery school and basic school (grades 1-9), whereas regions are responsible for upper secondary and vocational education. Municipalities create education commissions, or school boards. Regional authorities and local school boards appoint school heads. Higher education institutions have been autonomous since 2001. Higher education programs are accredited by an independent Accreditation Commission

Schools have authority to hire and fire teachers, implement curricula, financial management. All schools are required to form a school council to help the school head manage the school. Compulsory schools pick from a list of curricula approved by the Ministry. They are free to use whatever school organization and teaching strategies they choose. At the upper secondary level, schools choose or develop their own curricula that must be approved by the Ministry.

The reforms allowed the creation of private schools for the first time. While some have been created, these represent a tiny segment of the schools.

Structure

Czech children are required to begin school at age 6 and attend for a minimum of 9 years of basic school. Nearly 90% of children ages 3-6 also attend nursery schools which are usually free. The first five years of basic school are called primary school and the next four years are lower secondary school. While most children attend neighborhood schools, the choice of school is free.

Once students complete the compulsory school, they attend one of three types of upper secondary schools: the gymnasium, the technical/professional school or the vocational school. Over 90% of students continue onto upper secondary school. Students apply to these schools, which set their own entrance requirements. About 15% of students attend the gymnasium (pre-university curriculum), about 25% of students attend the technical/professional school and about 60% attend vocational school. A recent development is a gymnasium serving younger students, at either 5th grade or 7th grade. This is not a widespread practice at this point: about 10% of younger students (starting in 6th grade) attend these schools. Students graduating from gymnasium, technical/professional schools and the longer, more academically oriented programs at the vocational school received a maturite certificate after passing subject-based examinations that are administered and graded by each school. These are given in two compulsory subjects (Czech and a foreign language) and two optional subjects specified by the school. Students in the shorter vocational programs receive a vocational certificate. A much higher percentage of students participate in programs leading to a maturite now than a decade ago.

After upper secondary school, students with a maturite can attend university, a technical school offering professional training or a higher vocational program. Higher vocational programs were created in the 1990s. Initially, they led to a terminal vocational certificate, but recent reforms have allowed students in these programs to transfer to university and accrue credit towards a university degree. When the higher vocational programs were created, short programs offered by the technical schools to serve gymnasium graduates who wanted to be more marketable were abolished.

Curricula

New framework educational programs are being written and piloted now. They are supposed to be approved by March 2006 and implemented during the 2007/8 school year.

At present, the curriculum for grades one through five of basic schools (primary school) consists of nine subjects: Czech language and literature, introduction to acquiring knowledge, the fundamentals of geography and geology, the fundamentals of natural sciences, mathematics, physical education, musical education, work education, and drawing, painting and sculpture. For the sixth through the ninth year of basic school (lower secondary school), the curriculum contains more subjects, including foreign language, civic education, history, biology, physics, and chemistry. In addition, students can choose optional subjects, such as a second foreign language, computer science, or technical education. Most Czech school children can read well by grade 2.

At the upper secondary level, the Ministry has prescribed the curriculum areas schools focus on. For the gymnasium, the majority of courses are in the core subjects (Czech language, 2 foreign languages, Latin, social science, history, geography, mathematics, geometry, physics, chemistry, biology, information technology, the arts, physical education.) There are also 12 specialization areas (mathematics, mathematics and physics, natural sciences, information technology, living languages, classical languages, humanities, arts and physical education, etc.) The schools work out their own program and specializations they will offer.

The technical schools vary. Originally founded to offer specialized instruction leading to employment, some continue to offer narrow programs while others offer a broad general education. The Ministry prescribes general courses for all programs within a specialization and then specific technical courses for a more narrow area. (For example, there is a specialization in electronics and then a more narrow program for light current electrotechnics.) The general course are: Czech, foreign language, math, civics, physical education, history, physics and chemistry. The technical courses are in subjects like: technical drawing, electronics. School heads can change a certain percentage of the program to better fit the regional labor market.

The vocational schools only came under the control of the education ministry in 1990 and then the regional governments in 2001. Before then, they were run by companies. There are 16 broad areas (profiles) that vocational schools offer programs in that cover 125 different professions. Some of the programs have a practical component. Practical training mostly takes place in schools, not in the workplace. Final exams for vocational schools have practical and theoretical components.

Higher Education

Higher education is the sector that has been most dramatically reformed, with the creation of autonomous institutions and the creation of a non-university sector for vocational training. Enrollment in higher education, while still quite low by EU standards, has doubled since the 1990s. There are currently 57 institutions of higher education in the Czech Republic, 27 of which are universities. Higher education is free for students, although higher education institutions are also able to offer fee-based courses to individuals and companies.

Higher education institutions prepare their own study programs, which need to be approved by an independent Accreditation Commission. The universities award bachelor degrees, master degrees and doctoral. Degree candidates must pass national exams. Of those admitted to higher education institutions, about 48% are from gymnasium, 47% are from upper secondary technical schools and 5% are from vocational schools. Despite the expansion of slots in higher education, the sector is only about to meet about 60% of the demand for slots.

Professional schools provide students with advanced technical training. The curriculum is prepared by the school and accredited by the Ministry. Each school defines its own admissions criteria and creates its own entrance examination. These schools lead to a specialist diploma. The diploma is granted after students pass an exam with a practical and theoretical component. Schools design these exams which are then accredited by the Ministry. As mentioned, since 1998 these diplomas can be credited towards a bachelor's degree should a student decide to transfer to or move onto university.

Continuing Education

The Czech Republic is currently preparing new legislation to revamp and streamline continuing and adult education. Currently, adults can participate in an upper secondary or higher education program, many of which are offered part time. Retraining is overseen by the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, although institutions offering training must be accredited by the education ministry. Adult vocational courses lead to vocational certificates that can now be counted towards a higher education degree.

Financing

The Czech government transitioned to formula funding of schools in the 1990s. Funding is based on enrollment numbers. About 70% of funding comes from the Ministry. This covers teacher salaries and education-related costs. The remainder comes from regional and municipal budgets and covers capital and operating costs.

The Ministry of Education covers the costs of adult retraining (via regional councils). Municipalities are expected to cover the costs of adult basic education.

Teachers

Teachers must obtain a university qualification, usually a master's degree. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports oversees professional development for teachers in basic and upper secondary schools.

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