Promoting quality education in Kazakhstan

Blog

Education planners Zulfiya Torebekova and Nurgul Shamshieva describe current efforts to improve the quality of education in Kazakhstan.

Education is one of the main priorities of state policy in Kazakhstan. During the relatively short period since independence in 1991, the government has made considerable investments in improving access to quality education, achieving significant progress in universal basic education, gender equality in education, and adult literacy. In the 2012 PISA assessment Kazakhstan moved upward ten positions in the OECD rankings, from 59th place to 49th place. In 2015, Kazakhstan reached 99% attendance for primary education, 100% for secondary education, 99.6% coverage for general adult literacy, and 99.3% for gender equality.

However, a cross-regional comparison of educational achievement in the PISA 2012 assessment revealed low scores in rural schools, with scores in mathematics and reading 8-10% below the national average. Furthermore, on Kazakhstan’s Unified National Test (UNT), students from rural schools scored on average 66.50 points, while students from urban schools scored 76.16 points.

These eye-opening results from PISA and other assessments have pushed the government to initiate extensive programmes to provide equitable and quality education in rural areas, as well as to give increased support to disadvantaged students with learning difficulties. In 2012, the country adopted a five-year National Action Plan to improve students’ functional literacy skills, encourage creative thinking and problem solving, as well as to ensure the readiness of students for lifelong learning. In addition to adjusting the curriculum and management system, five particular measures have been taken to improve the quality of general school education, as detailed below:

1. Expansion of the pre-school network

The government of Kazakhstan has made the expansion of pre-school education a priority. Between 2003 and the latest statistics from 2013, the network of pre-schools increased by over six times, to 8,143 facilities, primarily through the mechanism of public-private partnerships. Overall, pre-school education coverage has reached 81.6% of children aged 3-6 years old, and the new program for educational development for 2016-2019 aims at providing 100% coverage of preschool education.
There has been a six-fold increase in the number of preschools in Kazakhstan.

2. Creation of regional hub-centres to support rural ungraded schools

A distinctive feature of the school network in Kazakhstan is the prevalence of small ungraded schools, accounting for almost half of all schools in Kazakhstan, including nearly 70% of rural schools. The provision of these mixed-grade schools ensures that all Kazakh citizens—even those in remote or underpopulated areas—are guaranteed the right to free preschool, primary, basic secondary and general secondary education in accordance with the Constitution. In order to achieve higher learning standards in these schools, special hub-centres have been set up across the regions, with each hub-centre supporting the improvement of education quality in three to four small ungraded schools. In 2015, there were 160 such hub-centres operating across Kazakhstan.

3. A new system of teacher professional development

In partnership with the University of Cambridge in the UK, Kazakhstan has started a new system of teacher professional development. The Basic level of the training program focuses on understanding learning processes in the classroom; the Intermediate level focuses on the whole school; and the Advanced level focuses on guiding learning processes within a network of schools. After successful completion of each level of the training program, teachers are entitled to additional payments of 30%, 70%, and 100% of their previous salary, respectively.

4. Development of new mechanisms of school financing

Kazakhstan recently piloted a new model of school financing based on a per-pupil formula. This mechanism of funding raises the financial autonomy of schools in providing differentiated salaries and bonuses based on performance, thus contributing to more efficient use of resources to improve the overall quality of education. Boards of Trustees, composed of parents, sponsors, and school graduates, are also helping to enhance transparency and accountability at the school level. During pilot implementation of this funding approach, the share of teachers with the highest qualification increased from 60% to 79% and the average student score on the Unified National Test improved from 76 points to 80 points.
5. Investment in school infrastructure and technologies

The Ministry of Education and local governments have also made considerable efforts to equip schools with modern technologies and laboratory facilities, as part of an effort to upgrade school infrastructure. By 2015, around half of all schools had physics, biology, chemistry, and language laboratories, with two-thirds of the newly equipped schools located in rural areas. Kazakhstan has also attached great importance to the use of information communications technology (ICT) in education. In 2010, the majority of schools were equipped with computer hardware and software, multimedia equipment, and interactive smart boards. Since the 2012-2013 academic year, Internet access is available in 98.8% of urban and 99.2% of rural schools, though not all with broadband technology. The State Program for Education Development sets a target of 80% of schools being equipped with modern laboratories, and 90% with broadband internet access, by 2020.

Expenditures on education in Kazakhstan have increased significantly since 2003. From 2014 to 2015 alone, the volume of allocated funds grew by 13.6%.

The Minister of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, Erlan Sagadiyev, has stated: “education determines the fate of our children, and the level of education depends on both educators and parents”.

The government of Kazakhstan plans to continue its partnership with parents around the country to provide the best possible education to the next generation.