

# A long path to a functional education system

Vladimír Burjan has been one of the most vocal and respected critics of the deficiencies of the Slovak education system for years. His criticism has always been constructive, based on his first-hand experience. His experience covers more than three decades in various positions within the education field. Earlier this year, he accepted the position of an external advisor to the current Minister of Education, a move which was not completely expected. However, his motivation remains unchanged – to use every opportunity to improve the Slovak education system.



**VLADIMÍR BURJAN**  
CEO of EXAM testing,  
External Advisor to the  
Minister of Education

It's been six months since you joined the team of the current Minister Plavčan as an external advisor – it's probably too early for a serious evaluation, but what are your impressions so far?

I should probably start with a short explanation of the position of the external advisors to the Minister of Education. There are seven of us and ever since our appointment in May we have been almost exclusively working on the preparation of the document Learning Slovakia – National Program of the Development of Education in Slovakia. So, in reality, we have not been advising Minister Plavčan as to what he should do tomorrow, we have been, so to say, preparing advice for all the Ministers of Education coming in the next ten years. The first version of the document has been recently released for public debate. So, from this point of view, my impressions are positive up till now. We received full support from the Minister and even the first consultations with the Members of the Parliamentary Committee for Education were constructive and supportive.

**How does education in Slovakia rank in comparison with other countries in the region, like Czech Republic, or Hungary?**

The Czech and Slovak educational systems are still quite similar and there are no substantial differences when speaking about primary and secondary schools. Some things

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work better there, others here. But when it comes to universities, Slovakia falls short substantially. Thousands of the best Slovak students apply every year for Czech universities because of their higher quality. This causes serious damage to our country. Hungary used to have a slightly better educational system than Slovakia, but several changes introduced recently by Viktor Orbán may have changed this. The results of Poland in the 2012 international PISA testing surprised

the whole world and were significantly better than those of Slovakia and Czech Republic. In a few weeks, OECD will release the results of the 2015 testing, so we will see whether it was a real trend or just an "error of measurement".

**In your opinion, what are currently the three biggest problems of the Slovak education system which should be solved with highest priority?**

Underfinancing, mismanagement, overregulation, too much bureaucracy, poor pre-service preparation of teachers, dividing of students into separate types of schools already at the age of 11, problematic national curriculum (too much content, too academic, too boring...) etc. I know you asked for three but it is difficult to choose just three from a list of one hundred.

**Why do so many employers complain about the quality of the graduates entering the labor market?**

Because they are in a difficult situation and it is easy to blame somebody else. They are, of course, right that our students are not particularly well prepared for what the employers expect of them. But, the other half of the truth is that every group of employers wants something else, and, every ten years most of them want something different than a decade ago. Moreover, it is very difficult to predict what will be needed in ten years'

## BIOGRAPHY

### EDUCATION

Comenius University Bratislava, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Master in Mathematics (1979 – 1984)

### WORK EXPERIENCE

Ministry of Education, External Advisor to the Minister (2016 – present)

DOBRÁ ŠKOLA – Journal about education in the 21st century, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief (2009 – present)

EXAM testing (company specializing in educational measurement), Founder, owner and CEO (1994 – present)

Institute for Educational Research (Výskumný ústav pedagogický), Head of the Department of Educational Measurement (1992 – 1994)

Ministry of Education, Head of the Department of General Education (1990 – 1992)

GAMČA (secondary grammar school in Bratislava), Teacher of mathematics in special classes for mathematically gifted students (1984 – 1989)



time. For such a conservative institution as the school, it is very difficult to meet all these constantly changing and often contradictory expectations. I am afraid that the time when schools produced "finished" employees has gone forever; the workforce will never again be shipped from the schools "ready-made". The companies themselves will have to take over a substantial part of the preparation of their employees. But, to be fair to the business world, even in those cases when the companies clearly state what they need, the schools are not able to deliver. One of the reasons is that they are not willing to stop teaching tons of specific facts and replace at least some of them with broader competencies and soft skills.

**To what extent can the needed reform be realized from the Ministry? Whose support is necessary for a successful transformation?**

In order for the reform to be really successful, at least four important conditions would have to be fulfilled. First, there has to be "political will" to really do it. Some of the necessary steps will not be very popular with the public, but the politicians must have the courage to do them anyway. Second, the government must be able and willing to provide the necessary financial resources. Without a substantial increase of the proportion of GDP spent on education, little can be done. Third, the Ministry would have to be able to steer and manage the whole process, which will not be easy, since it will require a change in the mindset and professional habits of tens of thousands of people. And that brings us to the fourth crucial condition: the support of teachers. The atmosphere in many schools is not reform-positive and it will not be easy to persuade them to participate in any reform process.

**Can a meaningful change be achieved through smaller positive steps over a longer period of time or is a complex transformative reform the only possible solution**

**at this stage?**

I do not believe that a complex transformative reform is possible in this country. I see neither enough political will nor enough money, nor enough preparedness amongst the teachers. So we will have to rely on a series of smaller steps over a longer period of time. But that shouldn't be a problem, provided we will keep the direction no matter who will form the next governments. By the way, that exactly was the key to the successful transformation of the Finnish educational system. The entire political establishment came to an agreement about an educational reform and then they worked on it continuously for 20 years. We should try to do something similar.

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**How would you define the role of the state in regulating the educational institutions? Where is the line separating necessary and meaningful regulation from pointless bureaucracy which is only a burden for the teachers and the schools?**

In my opinion, our educational system is badly overregulated. It suffers from a paralyzing centralization, annoying micromanagement, horrible bureaucracy, from a strictly hierarchical, top-down management with little or no participation of those involved at the

lower levels. One of the reasons is deep distrust on the part of the decision-makers towards those "down there" (headmasters and teachers). Robert de Lamennais has made the point many decades ago, saying that "centralization produces apoplexy at the center and paralysis at the extremities." And that is what we see in our educational system. In my view, the state should define the basic rules and principles (through legislation), provide sufficient funding, promote those, who do it well and give special support to those, who struggle (be it schools, teachers or pupils). But I am a realist and I know this will probably not happen any time soon in an educational system designed by Maria Theresa.

**Education has not been in the center of attention of any Slovak government so far. This long-term neglect has caused the problems to accumulate to a critical level. Do you see any chance for a change in this regard?**

Things have already changed quite a bit. Some five years ago education was not a topic for anybody. Politicians, media, the public – almost nobody cared. This is no longer the case. You find several articles about education in newspapers every week. The protesting teachers attracted a lot of attention not only from the politicians, but also from the broader public. Before the recent elections in March 2016, education became one of the most discussed themes. I registered a general feeling that the problem is urgent and that something has to be done. The topic of education occupied quite a lot of pages in the programs of political parties and they went far beyond the obligatory phrases like "education is the future of this country".

Unfortunately, some recent statements of the Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and the Head of the Parliament indicate, that they still do not really get the urgency of the problem. That is a warning signal.

**It is also true that education is not a top priority in the public eye. The profession of the teacher is often looked down upon by the general public. Where do you see the reasons for this and what could be done to change it?**

Consider the following three facts about the teaching profession: 1) It is too easy to become a teacher. If you want to become one, there are hardly any conditions you have to meet – you simply enter a pedagogical faculty and it is very likely that you will finish it and become a teacher. 2) Teachers are poorly paid – the state itself sends out a message, that teachers do not deserve more for what they do. 3) We have a lot of teachers (some 80 000). People generally tend to value more scarce things and professions. So, objectively, it is difficult in our days for the teaching profession to gain more respect from the public. It is a problem not only in Slovakia but in many countries. Finland is a famous exception, but there the facts 1) and 2) are not true.

**To what extent do you expect the digital revolution to change the role and function of schools in the years to come?**

To be honest, I personally do not belong to those techno-optimists who believe that IT will solve all the problems of our schools. I am not against using computers, tablets and various educational software in schools, but I fully agree with Steve Jobs, who famously said that "What's wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology." In recent years we have witnessed some massive investments into hardware and software for our schools. I do not think that money was properly spent. In our present situation we must primarily invest into teachers. We must raise their salaries, reform their pre-service and in-service education, improve their working conditions, provide them with sufficient support from other professionals etc. All that is much more important than interactive blackboards.