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**Title:** The main changes in the school system in the years 1998-2016 and their political context

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**Citation style:** Stępień-Lampa Natalia. (2017). The main changes in the school system in the years 1998-2016 and their political context. „Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis” (T. 19, 2017, s. 207-221)



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## The main changes in the school system in the years 1998—2016 and their political context

### Główne zmiany w ustroju szkolnym w latach 1998—2016 i ich polityczny kontekst

Natalia Stępień-Lampa\*

#### Abstract

The article characterizes the main changes in the school system in the years 1998—2016 and their political context. The author focuses on the agenda of the reform which instituted junior secondary schools. It also concerns the new programme document which was released in 2008 (modernization of the school system reform). The last issue which the author focuses on is the school system reform carried out by the Law and Justice party. It involves abolishment of junior secondary schools, extension of the time of education in: primary school (up to 8 years), secondary school (up to 4 years), technical school (up to 5 years) and establishment of the first and second level of trade schools (instead of vocational schools).

**Key words:** the school system reform, junior secondary schools, political context of educational changes

#### Abstrakt

W artykule scharakteryzowano najważniejsze zmiany w ustroju szkolnym dokonane w latach 1998—2016 oraz ich polityczny kontekst. Analizie poddano założenia reformy systemu oświaty, w wyniku której m.in. utworzono szkoły gimnazjalne. W dalszej części omówiono przyjęcie w 2008 roku nowej podstawy kształcenia ogólnego, co stanowiło korektę reformy z 1998 roku. Ostatnią kwestią przedstawioną w opracowaniu jest przeprowadzana przez Prawo i Sprawiedliwość zmiana ustroju szkolnego, a więc likwidacja szkół gimnazjalnych, wydłużenie nauki w szkole podstawowej (do 8 lat), liceum ogólnokształcącym (do 4 lat) i technikum (do 5 lat), a także utworzenie szkół branżowych I stopnia (w miejsce szkół zawodowych) oraz II stopnia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** reforma systemu oświaty, gimnazja, polityczny kontekst zmian oświatowych

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After ten years following the change of the name of our country from the People's Republic of Poland to the Republic of Poland a key transformation of the legislation on the school system was effected. One of the results of that change was the introduction of junior secondary schools (called *gimnazjum* in Polish). Nearly 20 years later, another large educational reform was launched, in consequence of which junior secondary schools are going to be abolished. The present article characterizes the transitions in the school system, as planned and implemented in the years 1998—2016, and their political background. These problems not only made one of the areas of political dispute, but also attracted attention of the public opinion and posed a challenge to units of territorial self-government, which were entrusted with the responsibility for managing schools. For the above reason, their exploration from the perspective of political science seems of special importance.

The reform under which junior secondary schools were established was put in place by the government formed by the Electoral Action Solidarity and Freedom Union (AWS and UW, respectively). The cabinet was headed by Jerzy Buzek, and the Minister of Education was Mirosław Handke. Beside the school system, the reforms also encompassed the public administration (namely, the establishment of a three-tier territorial self-government), the healthcare system (as a part of which Patients' Funds were instituted), the system of social security (by creation of insurance "pillars"). Initiation of the educational reform along with reforms of other important areas of social life was intended, as declared by its authors, to contribute to the success of that general undertaking. Such opinion was also voiced by UNESCO experts for educational reforms.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, as highlighted by Krzysztof Konarzewski, modification of the educational system differed from the remaining reforms launched by the J. Buzek's cabinet inasmuch as it was the only one to be preceded by independent scientific research. The respondents in the research process were the authors of curricula and textbooks, school administrators, and headmasters, teachers, students, and their parents.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the premises of the educational reform were consulted with experts from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the General Council for Higher Education and the Advisory Board for the Reform of National Education. Opinions in this matter were also expressed by trade unions, self-government institutions, associations, and representatives of different Churches.<sup>3</sup>

As of today, the effects of the three of four big reforms of J. Buzek's government have been diminished. In 2004 Patients' Funds were replaced by the

<sup>1</sup> C. KUPIŚIEWICZ: *Projekty reform edukacyjnych w Polsce*. Warszawa 2006, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> K. KONARZEWSKI: *Reforma oświaty. Podstawa programowa i warunki kształcenia*. Warszawa 2004, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> A. ĆWIKLIŃSKI: *Zmiany w polskiej edukacji w okresie globalizacji, integracji i transformacji systemowej*. Poznań 2005, p. 339.

National Health Fund. In 2011 amendments were introduced to the retirement system — contributions paid to the second insurance pillar (so-called Open Pension Funds) were decreased, and a significant portion of funds gathered therein was shifted to the first pillar, managed by the Social Security Institution (ZUS).<sup>4</sup> In addition, in 2016, new school law provisions were enacted,<sup>5</sup> under which, starting on 1 September 2017, junior secondary schools are being gradually liquidated. According to the planned transition timetable, these institutions will cease to exist on 1 September 2019, which means that by that time they will have been in operation for exactly 20 years.

The legislation reforming the school system under which junior secondary schools were instituted, was adopted in 1998, and its provisions entered into force in 1999. Among the principal aims of the amendment, one could distinguish:

- 1) promotion of secondary and higher education, which was to contribute to the improvement of the society's educational level;
- 2) equalization of educational opportunities;
- 3) improvement in the quality of education.

Fulfilment of all the above assumptions was to be facilitated by bringing about a series of transformations in the school system. As a part of the reform, the common mandatory education was prolonged from 8 years of study in the elementary school to 9 years in the elementary school and the junior secondary school. In this way, the moment of splitting up the school career paths was postponed. Moreover, following from the adoption of the new legislation, specific stages of the structure of the educational system covered children and young people at the same level of mental and physical development.<sup>6</sup> Due to the above, it was intended to adjust the functioning of a school to the specific needs of a given age group. The amendments affected also vocational education, which, after 1998, was provided in basic vocational schools, technical schools and speciali-

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<sup>4</sup> As announced by the politicians of the Law and Justice party, the political group wielding power in Poland since November 2015, also the National Health Fund is going to be abolished. Further transformations are to affect retirement insurance. According to the plans of the Minister of Development and Finances, Mateusz Morawiecki, as of 1 January 2018 Open Pension Funds will cease to exist, and a significant part of their assets (75%) is going to be transferred to the third insurance pillar (Individual Pension Accounts), while the remaining 25% will be shifted to the Demographic Reserve Fund. The Economic Division of the Polish Press Agency — <http://biznes.pap.pl/pl/news/pap/info/1757149,srodki-z-akcji-dla-obywateli--najbar-dziej-prawdopodobne-rozwiazanie-ws--ofe---morawiecki> (accessed: 10.02.2017).

<sup>5</sup> Educational Law Act of 14 December 2016 [Dz.U. 2017, item 59], Act of 14 December 2016 — Provisions Implementing the Educational Law Act [Dz.U. 2017, item 60].

<sup>6</sup> After the reform, the first education stage included grades I—III of the elementary school, the second one — grades IV—VI of the elementary school, the third one — junior secondary school, the fourth one — upper-secondary school. See B. DYRDA, S. KOCZOŃ-ZUREK, I. PRZYBYLSKA: *Podstawy prawne i organizacyjne oświaty. Skrypt dla studentów pedagogiki*. Katowice 2008, p. 45.

zed secondary schools. On top of that, supplementary secondary and technical schools were created for graduates of vocational schools who wished to carry on education on a higher level. In this manner, permeability of the system was guaranteed. It made a significant novelty as compared to the *status quo ante* — when vocational school graduates planning to study at universities had to complete a full educational course in a secondary school whose completion entitled to take the matriculation exam. Additionally, the reform introduced external examinations (sixth-grade test, junior secondary school exit exam, matriculation exam, and vocational exams) prepared and graded by external entities (Central Examination Board and District Examination Boards).<sup>7</sup> The school system, after the amendment introduced by the ministry under M. Handke looked as follows: 6-year elementary schools, 3-year junior secondary schools, 3-year general secondary schools, 3-year specialized secondary schools, 4-year technical schools, 2- or 3-year basic vocational schools and 2- and 3-year supplementary secondary and technical schools.<sup>8</sup>

The educational reform put in place on 1 September 1999 amounted to a holistic change since it had a comprehensive character, covering the entire system. The reform was implemented in stages — in the years 1999—2002, 3-year junior secondary schools were introduced, in the years 2002—2005, in turn, 3-year general secondary schools and 3-year specialized secondary schools were instituted, and in the years 2002—2006 — 4-year technical schools. Moreover, in 2002, for the first time ever, two external exams took place — the sixth-grade test and junior secondary school exit exam, and in 2005 first junior secondary school graduates took the matriculation exam. Apart from the major modifications to the structure of the educational system, also the methods of administering schools were changed, as well as school programmes and curricula, methods of evaluation of students' knowledge and skills, qualification requirements for teachers, their promotion paths, and terms of remuneration.<sup>9</sup>

The reform of the school system also involved a change in school curricula. For each subject taught at school a handful of proposals were prepared. This confronted schools and teachers with the need to choose the curriculum, and the textbooks based thereon. Moreover, teachers were guaranteed the possibility to draw up their own curriculum, which then had to be confirmed by the superintendent of schools. At the same time, adoption of uniform core curricula and standard requirements was to guarantee that students had the same level of knowledge and skills — regardless of the specific curriculum followed in a specific school. Modification of curricula was accompanied by resignation on overburdening of the teaching contents with encyclopedic knowledge and its replace-

<sup>7</sup> *Reforma systemu edukacji w Polsce. Projekt*. Warszawa 1998.

<sup>8</sup> B. DYRDA, S. KOCZOŃ-ZUREK, I. PRZYBYLSKA: *Podstawy prawne i organizacyjne oświaty...*, pp. 48—55.

<sup>9</sup> A. ĆWIKLIŃSKI: *Zmiany w polskiej edukacji w okresie globalizacji...*, pp. 337—339.

ment by the tendency to develop thinking and understanding of phenomena. The issues presented at school should, in the view of the experts who prepared the core curricula, depict the world comprehensively, which is why so-called cross-curricula education paths were introduced, as a part of which a single problem was discussed at various classes.<sup>10</sup>

The reform of the school system of 1999 did not win full social acceptance, although it must be admitted that it gave rise to more positive than negative opinions. The results of the survey carried out by TNS OBOP (Public Opinion Poll Center) in the first weeks of implementation of the amendment (in September 1999) reveal that most Poles (59%) were interested in the educational reform. At the same time, 51% of the persons interested in that matter claimed that it was legitimate to introduce the reform. Its assumptions were contested by 35% of the respondents interested in the problem.<sup>11</sup> The change, however, was not accepted by teachers, that is its direct executors, who argued that the reform was implemented without consultations with the teacher environment. In response to the undertakings of the ministry run by M. Handke, the largest trade union active in the industry — the Polish Teachers' Union organized, in the period 1999—2000, nationwide strikes of teachers and educational staff in the defense of the Polish school.<sup>12</sup>

In the opinion of Marta Zahorska, as far as the assumptions underlying the 1999 reform of the educational system are concerned, one can trace efforts to satisfy politicians and sympathizers of the two formations represented in the cabinet of J. Buzek — right-wing and conservative Electoral Action Solidarity (AWS) and neoliberal Freedom Union (UW).<sup>13</sup> In the process of reforming, emphasis was put on rationalization of expenses, introduction of elements of competition between educational institutions. It was stressed that parents had the right to choose their child's school and influence its operation. Nonetheless, among the objectives of the reform, there was also a postulate to equalize educational opportunities, which is most frequently put forward by left-wing parties.

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<sup>10</sup> M. ZAHORSKA: "Sukcesy i porażki reformy edukacji" — [http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmetal.element.desklight-0e2f8088-b4f1-4f41-ae70-d6671257adad/c/Marta\\_Zahorska.pdf](http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmetal.element.desklight-0e2f8088-b4f1-4f41-ae70-d6671257adad/c/Marta_Zahorska.pdf) (accessed: 12.02.2017).

<sup>11</sup> TNS OBOP: "Polacy o reformie oświaty" — [http://tnsglobal.pl/archiw\\_files/130-99.pdf](http://tnsglobal.pl/archiw_files/130-99.pdf) (accessed: 12.02.2017).

<sup>12</sup> B. ŚLIWERSKI: *Problemy współczesnej edukacji. Dekonstrukcja polityki oświatowej III RP*. Warszawa 2009, p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> The educational reform of 1999, to a large extent, complemented the neoliberal visions of the Polish state's development. In its effect, principal focus at school was placed on democratic values, rule of law, social and economic development, as well as freedom, tolerance and openness to different opinions. Simultaneously, school contributed to intensification of pro-social behaviours amounting to more frequent than previously engagement of students in voluntary services, and, in the same way, to development of the third sector and civil society.

This means that the reformers based the educational change on broad ideological foundations.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1999 reform of the school system, one can find both positive and negative aspects. Most certainly, it was advantageous to introduce the system of external exams, and to increase the qualification requirements for teachers. In the process of educational reform, it was also necessary to introduce changes in respect of the administration of the school system. Such changes specifically followed from the creation of two new tiers of territorial self-government, namely the *powiat* and the self-governmental voivodeship. It also seemed necessary to modernize school curricula and programmes. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the new proposals were also met with criticism. A part of teachers perceived them as attempts to lower the requirements envisaged for students and to decrease the level of teaching. Worse still, the hastily prepared curricula oftentimes included mistakes and gaps. In addition, curricula intended for upper secondary schools were not duly prepared — they comprised almost the entire previous didactic material, although after the reform teachers were to implement it within a period shorter by year. The role of specialized secondary schools was not clarified (these schools were successors of vocational secondary schools) and, resultantly, graduation from such institutions did not imply award of professional qualifications.<sup>15</sup> Also the establishment of junior secondary schools was not met with full approval. Their critics argued that such schools gathered young people at the difficult puberty age. Moreover, junior secondary schools failed to fulfil another aim intended for those institutions, namely to equalize educational opportunities.<sup>16</sup> It must be emphasized that a key role in this respect should be played by kindergartens, and only later, schools, including junior secondary

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<sup>14</sup> M. ZAHORSKA: “Sukcesy i porażki reformy edukacji”...

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> In the first decade of operation of junior secondary schools in Poland, the phenomenon of inequalities in education was still present. As argued by the authors of the *Report on the condition of education* in 2010, the level of a child's education was at the time most often dependent on his/her parents' education. If in a student's family at least one of the parents had higher education, the chances that the child would also complete it were 73%. If, however, the highest educated parent had only secondary education, the odds that the child would obtain a university degree were merely 34%. Moreover, the report indicated that young people in technical schools, specialized secondary schools and basic vocational schools were on average poorer students. This means that the mere fact of attending a given school type translated into higher or lower educational opportunities. A similar regularity related to the student's residence. It turned out that there were still high discrepancies between urban and rural areas. Rural areas were inhabited by people of lower education and income levels, and lower living standards. Moreover, there were also differences within the cities — children and the youth living in so-called poverty ghettos stood lower chances for educational success. THE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE: *Raport o stanie edukacji 2010*. Warszawa 2011, pp. 201—214. See N. STĘPIEŃ-LAMPA: *Szanse edukacyjne dzieci i młodzieży z obszarów wielkomiejskiej biedy w Siemianowicach Śląskich. Raport z badań*. Katowice 2016.

schools, which make the third stage in the education chain.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it seems that the goal set out by the reformers for Polish schools, namely promotion of secondary and higher education, was successfully achieved.<sup>18</sup> And yet, it would be impossible to determine to what extent this was a consequence of the reform itself, and to what extent it resulted from the evolution of the society.<sup>19</sup>

During the first couple of years of the educational system being reformed, both teachers and students, as well as their parents, familiarized themselves with the new terms of operation of their schools. However, already at the initial stage of implementation of the reform, one could trace advantageous changes, as compared to the previous amendment period, which proves that the quality of education in Poland improved. Success of the transition made in the school system may be illustrated by the fact that in 2003 Polish 15-year-olds attending junior secondary schools achieved better results in the PISA testing than graduates of 8-year elementary schools in 2000.<sup>20</sup> In 2000, as many as 23% of students did not develop the skills of reading and interpretation at a satisfactory level. However, in 2003, when the tested group were second-grade students of newly established junior secondary schools, the percentage of pupils with lowest skills decreased. However, the results of Polish students did not exceed the average results for OECD member states. In 2006, the constant character of such state of affairs was confirmed.<sup>21</sup>

One decade after the initiation of the process of reforming the school system, a particularly crucial modification was introduced to education. This amendment

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<sup>17</sup> M. ZAHORSKA: “Równi, równiejsi i... najmniej równi, czyli o społecznych barierach w dostępie do edukacji.” *Polityka Społeczna* 2009, No 9, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy that the reforms constitutive for the educational system were characterized by the fact that the promoted model of the graduates of specific school types and education levels seemed to correspond to the assumed and implemented processes of development of the Polish state. Such thesis may be confirmed by expansion of secondary and higher education and depreciation of vocational training, the tendencies dominant in the period of social-political-economic transformation, and the related restructuring of heavy industry. Today, one can rather observe opposite tendencies in education.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. ZAHORSKA: “Polski ‘boom edukacyjny’ i jego następstwa.” In: *Polska po 20 latach wolności*. Eds. M. BUCHOLC, S. MANDES, T. SZAWIEL, J. WAWRZYŃIAK. Warszawa 2011, pp. 175–190.

<sup>20</sup> The PISA tests (Programme for International Student Assessment) are carried out by an international consortium supervised by OECD and representatives of its member states. The testing covers 15-year-olds and verifies the following skills: reading and interpretation, mathematical skills, reasoning in natural sciences. In each PISA edition, one of the above makes a leading discipline. Poland participates in the programme since 2000, and its subsequent editions take place every three years. Since 2013, evaluation of students as a part of the PISA testing has been entrusted to the Educational Research Institute. Previously, it had been carried out by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

<sup>21</sup> EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE — <http://www.ibe.edu.pl/pl/projekty-miedzynarodowe/pisa> (accessed: 13.02.2017).



was made by the government of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party (PSL), and the person in charge of the ministry responsible for education was at that time Katarzyna Hall. The legislation implementing the reform was adopted in 2008.<sup>22</sup> The reform consisted in the introduction, in the years 2009—2015, of a new core curriculum for general education. The change of the core curriculum was, in the first place, dictated by the fact that in the system of education, as shaped by M. Handke's reform, junior and upper secondary school taught twice the same teaching material to their students. With the view to preventing repetition of the material, under the new core curriculum, these two types of school institutions were combined in terms of the syllabus (but not structurally). Moreover, as a result of the modernization of the educational system, specialized secondary schools were abolished. These institutions, from the moment of their creation, recorded poor educational figures (measured predominantly with the students' achievements at the matriculation exam), and less and less young people decided to attend them. Also supplementary secondary and technical schools were shut down, which was justified by high interest of young people in schools preparing for the matriculation exam and high accessibility of education in such institutions. For another thing, cross-curricula educational paths were done away with under the amendment. Finally, adoption of the new core curriculum for general education forced changes relating to external exams. In 2012, students for the first time took the new junior secondary school exit exam, and in 2015 for the first time the new sixth-grade test was carried out, as well as matriculation exam under a different formula.<sup>23</sup> It is also natural that in addition to the amendments to the core curriculum, it was necessary to prepare and print new textbooks.

Implementation of the new core curriculum for general education was not socially contested. At that time, attention of the public opinion was focused on the lowering of the starting age of mandatory school education. The process of introducing 6-year-olds to elementary schools and covering 5-year-olds with mandatory kindergarten care in the reception class came along with implementation of the core curriculum. It was initially scheduled for the years 2009—2012.

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<sup>22</sup> The new core curriculum for general education was adopted under the Regulation by the Minister of National Education of 23 December 2008 Amending the Core Curriculum for Kindergarten Education and General Education in Specific School Types [Dz.U. 2009, No. 4, item 17]. This piece of legislation was then repealed and replaced by the Regulation by the Minister of National Education of 27 August 2012 Concerning the Core Curriculum for Kindergarten Education and General Education in Specific School Types [Dz.U., item 977] and the regulations amending the foregoing passed in the years 2014—2016.

<sup>23</sup> For example — since 2009, history is taught in junior secondary schools up to 1918, and the remaining material is to be analyzed by students only in upper secondary schools. THE MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION (hereinafter: MEN): *Co warto wiedzieć o podstawie programowej?* Warszawa 2008.

This deadline was, however, extended and some of 6-year old kids started obligatory school education no sooner than on 1 September 2014.<sup>24</sup>

In 2015, as a consequence of parliamentary elections, the power in Poland was taken over by the Law and Justice. On 16 November 2015, the cabinet of the Prime Minister Beata Szydło was sworn in, and the Minister of National Education became Anna Zalewska. According to the declarations made during the election campaign, the Ministry of Education almost instantly started working on a fundamental reform of the school system, as a result of which the 8-year elementary school shall be restored and junior secondary schools are going to be abolished.<sup>25</sup>

On 16 September 2016, A. Zalewska presented a draft of a new statute named Educational Law Act, which would govern all questions relating to education.<sup>26</sup> The draft legislation was passed by the Council of Ministers on 8 November, and on 14 December 2016 the Act was adopted by the Sejm.<sup>27</sup> The new law will enter into force on 1 September 2017. The Ministry of Education launched a website on which the principal assumptions behind the planned reform were published. The change in the educational system was promoted by the slogan “A good school,” which was a reference to the slogan used by the Law and Justice in the 2015 election — “A good change.”<sup>28</sup> When justifying the draft legislation introducing the educational reform, it was indicated that junior secondary schools did not contribute to equalization of educational opportunities or improvement of the results and quality of teaching. What is more, a considerable por-

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<sup>24</sup> The Act of 30 August 2013 Amending the Educational System Act and the Act Amending the Educational System Act and Certain Other Acts [Dz.U., item 1265].

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the first decision made by the Law and Justice in education was the increase as of 1 September 2016 of the obligatory kindergarten education age (from 5 to 6) and mandatory school age (from 6 to 7). See the Act of 29 December 2015 Amending Educational System Act and Certain Other Acts [Dz.U. 2016, item 35].

Along with the increase of the mandatory education age, amendments were introduced to the core curriculum for kindergarten education and general education for the first grade of elementary school. See the Regulation by the Minister of National Education of 17 June 2016 Amending the Regulation Concerning the Core Curriculum for Kindergarten Education and General Education in Specific School Types [Dz.U., item 895]; Regulation by the Minister of National Education of 17 June 2016 Amending the Regulation Amending the Regulation Concerning the Core Curriculum for Kindergarten Education and General Education in Specific School Types [Dz.U., item 896].

<sup>26</sup> The reform of education put in place by B. Szydło’s cabinet comes in line with the State and National Agenda of Development of the Polish State and Strategy of Departing from the Neoliberal Thought in Poland, as adopted by the Law and Justice. Beside the change in the school system, it relates as well to transformations made to specific core curricula in specific subjects. Special emphasis was put by the reformers on teaching Polish and history.

<sup>27</sup> The Senate passed the Act on 16 December, and on 9 January 2017 it was signed by the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda.

<sup>28</sup> MEN — <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

tion of these institutions in large cities conducted selective recruitment, which gave rise to high diversification of such schools when it came to the results of the junior secondary school exit exam. It was argued that junior secondary schools were to be linked in terms of curricula with upper secondary schools, but in practice they often functioned in the form of school complexes jointly with elementary schools. The ministry also emphasized that in the future, in the context of a demographic decline, there will arise problems with the financing of junior secondary schools, to be experienced by the self-government.<sup>29</sup>

The reform of education undertaken by Law and Justice is going to introduce key changes to the existing school system.<sup>30</sup> After its implementation the structure of schools will comprise: 8-year elementary schools, 4-year general secondary schools or, alternatively, 5-year technical schools, 3-year trade schools of the first degree, 3-year specialized schools preparing for future work, 2-year trade schools of the second degree, and post-secondary schools.<sup>31</sup> The reform will be implemented gradually. According to the presented timetable, on 1 September 2017 former 6-grade elementary school graduates shall become the seventh-grade students in 8-year schools. This is to be correlated with gradual abolishment of junior secondary schools. Basic vocational schools, on their part, will be transformed into 3-year trade schools of the first degree (2-year trade schools of second degree will be instituted on 1 September 2020). On 1 September 2019, junior secondary schools will cease to exist, and the entire reform is going to be concluded in 2023 (then, the last year of junior secondary school graduates will graduate from 4-year technical schools).<sup>32</sup>

The reform of the school system aroused many controversies and attracted attention of the public opinion. As demonstrated by the results of the surveys carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Research, in January 2017 the Polish society was divided on that issue. 34% of the responders perceived the re-

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<sup>29</sup> MEN — <https://men.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/uzasadnienie-przepisy-wprowadzajace.pdf> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

<sup>30</sup> The drawbacks of the Polish school system after 1989 frequently invoked in the public debate are the decreasing prestige of vocational education and low level of adjustment of schools to the needs of the evolving labour market. The authors of the 1999 reform did not seem to pay due attention to these problems, and they were not considered constitutive assumptions underlying the transformation. On the other hand, a part of postulates of the last reform relates to the thus far depreciated vocational education. It is noteworthy that representatives of nearly all political factions agree that the desired model of vocational training should be dual (following the German pattern), where general knowledge is presented to students at school and professional training takes place at a workplace. Such solution would enable to gear vocational training to the needs of the labour market.

<sup>31</sup> MEN — <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/uczen-i-rodzic/struktura-szkol-po-zmianach.html> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

<sup>32</sup> MEN — <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/uczen-i-rodzic/jak-beda-przebiegaly-zmiany-w-kolejnych-latach.html> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

form as grounds for hope rather than fear, 31% had mixed feelings, and 27% expressed more fear than belief in the undertaking's success. At the same time, 94% of people who took part in the opinion poll declared to have heard about the reform, but only 49% claimed to know what the reform was to consist in. Concerns of the responders related predominantly to their conviction that the reform had not been duly prepared. Most of the interviewees (57%) accepted liquidation of junior secondary schools and the return to 8-year elementary schools, 4-year general secondary schools and 5-year technical schools. The percentage of responders opposed to the systemic change was 24%, and 19% had no opinion on that subject. Almost a half (44%) of the persons who participated in the survey believed the reform is going to be a high financial burden for the territorial self-government.<sup>33</sup> The results of the opinion poll carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Research corresponded, in large measure, to the atmosphere dominating in mass media concerning the educational reform at the turn of 2016 and 2017. The questions included in the survey were often discussed by experts and commented on by politicians.<sup>34</sup>

Already in the first months of 2016, the expressed intentions of the Ministry of Education relating to the reform gave rise to concerns of a considerable group of educational staff. Once the draft legislation was published, a part of teachers voiced their doubts about the abolishment of junior secondary schools they would have to leave schools or be employed on a part-time basis. The draft bill was criticized by the Polish Teachers' Union, which in December 2016 initiated the industrial disputes procedure, and announced industrial action scheduled for March 2017, which was to consist in abstaining from work by teachers and personnel employed in school administration and operating staff.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the planned reform of the school system gave rise to a number of doubts among representatives of self-government units, and it is the self-government that will be directly responsible for implementation of the amend-

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<sup>33</sup> CENTER FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH: *Polacy o reformie edukacji*. Warszawa 2017.

<sup>34</sup> A critical opinion on the Draft Educational Law Act, and especially on the liquidation of junior secondary schools was, for example, drawn up by experts of the Centre of Analysis of the Jagiellonian Club — Dominika Hofman-Kozłowska, Mikołaj Herbst, Barbara Strycharczyk, Sylwia Sysko-Romańczuk. According to these authors, the arguments deployed by the Ministry in favour of the reform were backed by unbalanced research exclusively supportive of reforming the school system. This, in turn, gives an impression of unanimity of the scientific environment on that matter, while in fact it has been divided. At the same time, the Club's experts were decidedly against liquidation of junior secondary schools. D. HOFMAN-KOZŁOWSKA, M. HERBST, B. STRYCHARCZYK, S. SYSKO-ROMAŃCZUK: "Komentarz do wybranych rozwiązań zawartych w projekcie ustawy *Prawo oświatowe z 16 września 2016 roku*" — <http://cakj.pl/2016/10/14/komentarz-do-wybranych-rozwiazan-zawartych-w-projekcie-ustawy-prawo-oswiatowe-z-16-wrzesnia-2016-roku> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

<sup>35</sup> POLISH TEACHERS' UNION — [http://www.znp.edu.pl/element/2941/SPOR\\_ZBIOROWY\\_STRAJK\\_Krok\\_po\\_kroku](http://www.znp.edu.pl/element/2941/SPOR_ZBIOROWY_STRAJK_Krok_po_kroku) (accessed: 18.02.2017).

ment. Under the new legislation, up until 31 March 2017, units of territorial self-government were to adopt resolutions adjusting the network of schools to the new system. Previously, however, the respective draft resolutions were to be receive a positive opinion of the competent school superintendent, who had to deliver such opinion within 21 days. At the same time, the ministry declared to provide financial support to self-government units, which is going to partly cover the costs incurred in connection with the educational reform.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, critics of the actions taken by the Ministry of Education pointed to the haste which, in their opinion, accompanied the reform. In this context, they invoked especially a significant delay in the works on the new core curricula. They also pointed out numerous errors that could be found in those documents. This issue is especially important since only after the conclusion of works on the core curricula will it be possible to prepare new textbooks, which are needed for a part of the students already from 1 September 2017.<sup>37</sup>

Arguments for persons opposed to the liquidation of junior secondary schools were also provided by the results of the PISA tests published by the Educational Research Institute (IBE) on 6 December 2016. The testing was carried out in 2015 and covered over 500 thousand 15-year-olds from 72 countries. In Poland, these were junior secondary school attendees. Polish students managed to rank 10 in the European Union in natural science reasoning, 4 in reading and interpretative skills and 6 when it came to mathematical skills. The results achieved by the young people from Poland were above the average for the OECD member states in each of the categories mentioned above, whereas before the 1998 reform, the situation was quite different. However, it should be noted that the results of tests of Polish 15-year-olds in 2012 had been slightly better. Experts of the Educational Research Institute (IBE) explain that the worse results in the last edition of the PISA testing might be justified by the fact that for the first time in history tests were carried out with the aid of computers, and on such occasions Polish students usually achieve lower results.<sup>38</sup>

Most definitely, the reform of the educational system prepared by the ministry run by A. Zalewska is the largest modification of that type since 1998 and for that reason, its implementation involves intensified organizational efforts and considerable financial outlay. Both self-governmental authorities and headmasters, teachers, students and their parents will have to familiarize themselves with the principles of operation of the school system in the first years following

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<sup>36</sup> MEN — <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/samorzad/rola-samorzadow-podczas-wprowadzania-reformy.html/> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

<sup>37</sup> These works were concluded on 14 February 2017. MEN — <https://men.gov.pl/projekt-podstawa-programowa> (accessed: 18.02.2017).

<sup>38</sup> EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE: “Program Międzynarodowej Oceny Umiejętności Uczniów. Wyniki badania 2015 w Polsce” — <http://www.ibe.edu.pl/pl/projekty-miedzynarodowe/pisa> (accessed: 20.02.2017).

its implementation, as was the case after 1998. Questions which spring to mind in that context are whether the subsequent turbulences relating to education were necessary and if liquidation of junior secondary schools and prolongation of the study period at general secondary schools and technical schools is going to improve the quality of education in Poland. By the present day, these questions have remained unanswered. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the undertaken reform of the school system, involving, among other elements, abolishment of junior secondary schools, was the implementation of the promises made by the Law and Justice during the election campaign preceding presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015. Moreover, liquidation of junior secondary schools as such was socially accepted.

The changes in the education introduced by the ministers M. Handke and A. Zalewska have stirred controversies. Although the common feature of the transformations was their gradual implementation, both were criticized for haste in preparing the core curricula. Such haste is undesired, because those documents condition the didactic process, and it is on their basis that publishers draw up textbooks and respective committees prepare external exams. Moreover, despite the consultations held by the respective ministries of national education (in the years 1997—1998 and 2015—2016), teachers approached both reforms with skepticism, and they were also criticized by a considerable group of trade union members. It means that the direct authors of the reforms treated them as top-down activities imposed by politicians, which definitely did not affect the reforming process positively.

Introducing educational reforms in the Polish social and political reality is nearly a permanent process. Most frequently, the transformations implemented by political decision-makers are then disavowed by their successors. It is difficult to speak of any accumulation of the hitherto achievements. What is even worse, education frequently makes an area of political disputes, and this, most certainly, is not favourable for Polish schools. The mechanisms described above may also be observed in the processes of reforming the educational system in the years 1998—2016.

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