

«It is possible to ensure equality in education by improving the pedagogical skills of teachers and equal access to broadband Internet (Broad Band WL). This will, accordingly, provide access to high-quality educational materials», - mentioned Zhaslan Nurbayev, an independent researcher and participant of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics from Nur-Sultan, in his article.

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#### **A brief overview of the article:**

- Today, there is a significant gap between rural and urban schools in Kazakhstan, which is manifested in equipment and material procurement, qualitative composition of the teaching staff and achievements of students;
  - The secondary education system in Kazakhstan is increasingly undergoing total reform. However, the state's measures to eliminate inequalities in education lead to even greater differentiation between urban and rural schools;
  - Implementation and completion of reforms depend on ministers of education, whose service life does not exceed 3-4 years. Therefore, before one reform is completed, new, more ambitious ones are being carried out. Accordingly, there is no continuity between them. In addition, many government programs contradict each other;
  - The interdisciplinary project "Auyl-El Besigi" (Ауыл - Ел бесігі), which is headed towards urbanization and optimization of rural schools, is aimed at more radical transformations. However, without detailed study and pilot testing of these innovations, we can come to even more irreparable consequences.
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The laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan guarantee equal access to quality education. However, this principle remains fragmented in Kazakhstan. The secondary education map is represented by various types of schools, rural and urban, as well as small-stuffing and international schools. The difference in funding, material and technical equipment and quality of education indicates the differentiation of schools. In addition, socio-economic and migration factors lead to the reduction in number of rural schools.

## Growing inequality between urban and rural schools

During the years of independence, about 1,500 schools were built in Kazakhstan. According to statistical data for 2018, 7047 schools functioned in Kazakhstan, 5,348 of them in rural areas, including 2,944 small-staffing schools.[\[1\]](#) The small-staffing school is a school without parallel classes. Most often, due to the small number of students, several classes are combined into one class. The small-staffed schools are located mainly in northern Kazakhstan.

The level of material and technical equipment of schools are one of the most important factors that indicate the efficiency and gains in performance of their activities. For example, the results of the PISA-2012 study (*Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA*) indicate the direct dependence of educational achievements of students on the material resources of schools. In the 2016-2017 school year, 22.5% of schools functioned in adapted buildings. Out of those 64 schools that were classed as dangerous, 59 were located in rural areas.[\[2\]](#)

An important condition for the qualitative characteristics of the educational process is the availability of classrooms of the new modification. The creation of such classrooms and delivery of interactive whiteboards to schools began in Kazakhstan back in 2005. But at the same time, as it is noted in reports of the National Academy of Education named after I. Altynsarin, in rural schools there is a lack of interactive equipment and subject classrooms. The small-staffed schools have no access to new classrooms in several subjects. For example, physics 1,102 (33.7%), chemistry - 1,273 (39%), biology - 1,283 (39.3%), mathematics - 958 (29.3%) and language laboratories (cabinets equipped with audio, video and multimedia) - 1 600 (49%).[\[3\]](#) Subject classrooms of the new modification in 2016 were accessible for only 48.5% of SSS (RK - 70%).[\[4\]](#)

In rural schools, there is a relatively low qualification profile of teachers. For example, the proportion of teachers with the highest category for the 2017-2018 school year was only 16.5%, with first category - 32.7%, second category - 26.9% of the total number of teachers in rural schools. 23.9% of rural teachers do not have any categories. The share of teachers in rural schools with the highest category is almost 2 times less than in urban ones.[\[5\]](#)

Today, the quality of education in small-staffed schools is lower than the national average. This is evidenced by the results of national and international studies of the quality of education. Thus, according to the results of PISA-2015, the SSS students scored an average of 414 points in reading literacy (students in urban schools — 440 points); in science - 447

points (city - 466), in math - 447 points (city - 472). Differences indicate that rural schoolchildren lag behind urban peers by more than half a year in natural science and a year in reading and mathematics.[\[6\]](#)

The results of international rankings are confirmed by the national education quality assessment system. The average score of the Unified National Testing (hereinafter - UNT) of graduates from the SSS in 2016 (78.2 points) is lower than the national average (81.2). According to the results of the EEEA-2018 (External evaluation of the educational achievements of students in Kazakhstani secondary education), rural schoolchildren lag behind the city average by 7.08 points.[\[7\]](#)

It can be stated that the differentiation between rural and urban schools is only increasing. Of course, on the part of the state, certain measures are being taken to reduce this inequality. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the weak, from our point of view, moments of the discourses and methods in the context of which the current school reforms are being implemented. In order to uncover the problem as much as possible, the focus will be on analyzing the internetization policy and digitalization of schools. In addition, it is important to correlate educational reforms with the political trends that are apparent in relation to the city and the village.

### **Absence of the “Correction of errors”**

Equipping rural schools with new computers and high-speed Internet should be completed by 2020. Such resources are guaranteed by the Informatization Strategy of the education system of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2020 and the State Program for the Development of the Education System of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020.



*In May 2019, the President of Kazakhstan, Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev, visited the capital's gymnasium school No. 68, where he was informed about the ongoing work on digitalization in educational institutions of the city of Nur-Sultan. Photo: akorda.kz*

Analyzing the strategy of informatization of the education system, we can conclude that many of the goals and objectives set out in the document were not implemented in practice. We will touch only the most basic ones: by 2014, 100% training of teachers and managers of all levels of education should have been completed, by 2018 teachers of all levels of education should have been provided with personal computers and peripheral equipment by 95%.<sup>[8]</sup> These tasks were not completed as planned.

Alas, today in Kazakhstan there is no mechanism for “correction of errors” with failed reforms. Therefore, not having time to complete, there are other projects or programs with similar goals and objectives that appear.

### **Contradictions of school reforms**

The state program “Digital Kazakhstan”, which was designed for 2017-2020, begins the implementation of its main mission only in this year. By 2020, fiber-optic communication lines are planned to be connected in 1,700 prospective rural settlements. Almost 2,000 schools will be provided with Internet which will have speed up to 20 megabits per second.<sup>[9]</sup> At the same time, this program will cover only 40% of small-staffed schools.

In the same years, the joint project of the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and

Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan - "Modernization of secondary education" will also be implemented. Until 2021, 58% of the World Bank loan will be used to equip 5400 rural and vulnerable schools with multimedia equipment.[\[10\]](#)

In general, these are very promising projects, under which it is assumed that by 2020 almost 100% of rural schools will be provided with necessary equipment, and teachers of rural schools will receive special training. At the same time, only 50% of rural schools will have full Internet by this time.

In addition, there is another problem - it is the relationship and interaction with reforms in other industries. For example, with the interdisciplinary project "Auyl-El Besigi" (*Ауыл - Ел бөцизи*). As part of this special project, it is planned to transform up to 1.5 thousand from 6.6 thousand rural settlements of the country so that by 2030 80% of Kazakhstani villagers live comfortably in them.[\[11\]](#)

Thus, the above mentioned projects directly or indirectly affect changes in rural schools. However, different numbers appear in each document. If under the "Digital Kazakhstan" program, 1,700 schools will be provided with broadband Internet, and under the "Modernization of secondary education" project, 5,400 schools will be equipped with technical means, then under the "Auyl - El Besigi" project, only 1,500 villages will remain in the country, respectively about the same number of rural schools. Discrepancy in numbers can be easily noticed...

### **Focus on urbanization. Optimization of rural schools.**

With the adoption in 2018 of the Strategic Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025, only promising villages will be subject to financing. Accordingly, the network of rural schools will undergo optimization. Funds for the provision of resources will be redirected to the construction of boarding schools and ensuring the transportation of students.

The same was said in the last Message of the First President Nursultan Nazarbayev: "... it is necessary to gradually move from the *"infrastructure to people"* model to the *"people to infrastructure"* model.[\[12\]](#) That is, the reduction in number of villages will be carried out with the help of their consolidation. This will affect the fate of rural schools.

Of course, it is very expensive for the state to support small-staffed schools. Studies show that unit costs per student at small-staffed schools are on average 2.5 times higher than in urban areas. Since there is a low occupancy of classes in small-staffed schools, they are far

from regional and oblast centers and transportation is often needed for students. Therefore, for example, in the media there are often calls to close them. But at the same time, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the elimination of small-staffed schools will have only a momentary effect of saving the country's budget. In the long run, we can get an army of young people who have not received the right to secondary education guaranteed by the state. People with a low level of education have great risks with finding a job, and with a stable income. All this leads to large expenditures on social assistance, health care and the penitentiary system. In the future, inequality in education will threaten the stability of the country.

*“The policy of eliminating most of the rural schools is unacceptable for rural residents of the country.”*

Predominantly, the villagers are not ready for such a sequence of events either morally or financially. Forced migration can lead to the emergence of such a phenomenon as “slum urbanization”. In addition, increases in such areas around cities or large villages fall into the ranks of the fringe groups, who are the source of informal and criminal employment.

### **“Reforming reforms”**

“Living in an era of changes” or in the context of ongoing reforms has become an everyday routine for Kazakhstanis. Studying only one aspect of the secondary education system - the provision of rural schools with information and communication technologies, we faced the following phenomenon: many programs and projects implemented in the country did not solve all the tasks that were set. Since 1996, the issue of informatization (information system development) of the secondary education system has been raised to the rank of a state problem. However, the Concepts, Strategies and Programs adopted during this period did not fully solve it. For example, the last Strategy of informatization of the education system until 2020 failed due to the fault of local executive bodies. According to the statements of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, they have disproportionately distributed the budget between urban and rural schools.

*“The tasks set and not fully solved in one state program smoothly flow into other programs and projects. Hence the effect of the infinity of reforms, or “reforming reforms” as we called the current condition of the education system has appeared.”*

It is possible to ensure equality in education by improving the pedagogical skills of teachers and equal access to broadband Internet. This will give, accordingly, access to quality educational materials. The PISA study confirms that the presence of computers connected

to the Internet, not only at home but also at school, contributes to a better acquisition of educational programs.

However, in this matter, differences can be noticed. The share of teachers at the school with the highest category is almost 2 times less than the national average. 34% of schools in Kazakhstan and 11% of small-staffed schools have access to broadband Internet.<sup>[13]</sup> The number of computers in schools in the country that require replacement is 29%, in small-staffed schools it is 35%.<sup>[14]</sup>

From September 1, 2016, a new unified information educational environment “Kundelik.kz” was launched in a pilot mode. By the end of 2018, the electronic journal covered about 5 thousand schools (70% of the market). Despite the statements of its developers and the Minister of Education that the basic functionality of the journal will be for free, parents are charged an annual fixed fee. In addition, many functions of the electronic resource are chargeable.<sup>[15]</sup> Not every parent, especially in rural areas, can afford to pay for such services.

Let us give another example with the problems of maintaining an electronic journal and the need for daily access to the online platform “Bilim Land”.

In December 2017, changes were made to the order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 502 “On approval of the form of strict reporting documents used by educational organizations in educational activities”. The changes concerned the class register (grade-book). When the educational organization is connected to the electronic system, the class register is filled in only in electronic format, its filling in on paper is not allowed.

However, opinion polls showed that in rural schools paper class registers are conducted on a par with electronic ones. Also, despite the official prohibition, it is the responsibility of the teacher to use the content of the online educational system “Bilim Land” in each lesson. Violation of the norms of the ministerial order comes from the local education authorities, or from school principals, who are primarily concerned about rating of their schools.

In connection with the implementation of the state program “Digital Kazakhstan”, the Internetization of rural schools is carried out by “Kazakhtelecom” JSC and the Consortium consisting of “SilkNetCom” LLP and “Transtelecom” JSC. From official sources, it is only known that until 2020, fiber-optic communication lines will be carried out in 1,700 prospective rural communities. Almost 2,000 schools will be connected to broadband Internet. And that’s all ... Open questions remain: What kind of villages and schools will be

connected to high-speed Internet? How much money is allocated for these events? Who controls the work of these companies? This list can be continued with much more.

Summarizing the above mentioned, I would like to offer the following recommendations:

- To adjust / synchronize the state policy in the field of secondary education with the programs for the reform of rural territories and the agro-industrial sector of the economy;
- To provide autonomy to general education schools. The financial, administrative and academic independence of rural schools will reduce inequalities between urban and rural schools. For example, expert surveys showed that the presence of computers, a sufficient number of interactive whiteboards and other equipment is often the result of the energy and enthusiasm of school leadership. Therefore, the personal interest of the school administration initiates the solution of many problems of the rural school.

The principle of transparency and accountability will provide such elements of school autonomy as planning and approval of the budget, participation of the guardian council and / or parental council in school management, accountability to stakeholders (the parent community, representatives of the local community, sponsors, state education authorities, etc.).

Of course, rural schools, as a special type of educational institution, require special attention from the state. Despite the fact that the preservation and development of the small-staffed schools network entails the need for serious investments in Kazakhstan, we are entitled to consider these costs as investments in the future of young people.

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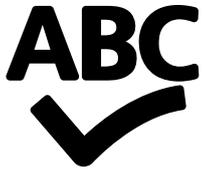
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