

# ICPS newsletter<sup>®</sup>

## Why is educational reform failing?

***The educational system in Ukraine is not keeping up with the needs of a modern society. This has been acknowledged in both government and academic circles. Although education remains an indispensable part of Ukrainian society, it is no longer performing its main function—educating its citizens to be ready for a socially meaningful life. Numerous attempts to reform the public education system by decree, top-down, have not had the desired effect because the interests of stakeholders were not taken into account. The result has been a state of permanent stagnation. A new book written by a senior ICPS staff member sets out one vision of ways to approach the reform of public education by applying public policy principles***

In February 2004, a book on the subject of educational reform in Ukraine was published, called *The Concept of Education or The Content of Educational Policy* (Ideya obrazovaniya ili soderzhaniye obrazovatel'noy politiki) and written by ICPS Deputy Director Volodymyr Nikitin, a PhD in Social Studies. Based on the author's work in educational pilot projects, the new book summarizes the experience of ICPS projects in education. Nikitin argues that lack of awareness of the comprehensive nature and challenges of public education has hampered effective debate over its future and approaches to transforming it.

### Education is still considered an "industry"

The endless rounds of educational debates, projects and publications in Ukraine give an impression of Plato's chaos, wherein the parts of the missing whole drift around and squabble with each other:

- Education is still considered an industry, a rigid concept that limits both financing and evaluating the system.
- All the proponents of reform enthusiastically advocate partial changes, without much thought to the bigger picture.
- Those responsible for reforms are ready to make specific changes without considering, let alone tackling, the underlying problems. And the opinions of those are traditionally considered "outsiders" are not taken into account.
- The teaching community, guided by the instinct of self-preservation, opposes

any debates or reforms that might challenge its ability to act effectively in face of the realities of the situation and—by extrapolation—to transform it.

- The overwhelming majority of proposals for reforming education are based on the assumption that, by throwing some money at the system and changing curricula, introducing some changes in curricula, and making sure the state maintains control, the public education system can somehow reflect both past insights and modern needs.

### Education cannot be transformed by top-down decrees

In summarizing his reflections on the history of education and the current attempts to reform it, Nikitin draws certain conclusions:

- All the forms, concepts and approaches to education have reflected the challenges and practical tasks of a certain historical period.
- None of the traditional approaches to education are intrinsically right nor wrong: they can only respond, or not respond, to today's critical tasks and/or capacities. In this view, there is no such thing as "advanced" (progressive) or "backward" approaches.
- It's impossible to design an approach to providing education that is universal, correct or even ideal for everyone.
- The specific form of education of a given country, social group or individual can only be found—both

when designing and when implementing it—in the correlation between specific goals, tasks and approaches.

Thus, the idea of preserving and transforming a historical multitude of educational forms through the process of a dialog involving all stakeholders comes into conflict with the more traditional model where the design and implementation of an "optimal" form are carried out by a single center, such as the state or an international organization, and are then applied to everybody.

Today, the government and the majority of educational professionals continue to insist on the primacy of already-established forms of education. Teacher training finds itself on a Procrustean bed, alternately stretched by "relevant evaluation criteria" and crushed by "organizational forms." This kind of policy can cause a development lag in the country or in new approaches eliminating all previous forms—including those that are vital to the community and to the system of public education.

### Effective reforms should be an example of openness

The task is to ensure that the interests of all education stakeholders are presented and considered in the process of developing strategies and making individual policy decisions, so that individual stakeholders' commitments and available resources are realistically and effectively formulated.

Can this be achieved when all the decision-making, resources and responsibility are concentrated in one place—namely, the government? Or does Ukraine need to set up a mechanism for public debate and to share the tasks and responsibilities among various participants in the educational process? No country in the world has a well-developed public education system that used the first approach. The level of state influence on education may vary, but no country has the financial and

administrative resources these days to provide the entire gamut of conditions in an efficient and effective way.

Under the first approach, the interests and tasks of education will inevitably be cut and reduced to a limited, manageable set that suits the capacities and interests of the state bureaucracy. The second approach raises a slew of challenges: the lack of public traditions and of administrators with appropriate skills; the entrenched view of education as a separate “industry” run by the government and managed by specialists; and the need to develop an educational policy mechanism. Still, the very implementation of this approach is a step in the formation of a learning society and the foundation for continuous transformation in education in response to the challenges of the times.

## Widespread approaches fail to address historical challenges

The book addresses some major challenges for modern education that demand changes in educational policy:

- the need for new ideal spaces for human activities and the capacity to include people of different cultures.
- the need for understanding and communication.
- the structural uncertainty and interrelatedness of the human world.
- the ability to retain cultural diversity.
- the threat of man-made and natural disasters.

According to Nikitin, persisting along the lines of currently common recommendations regarding education will lead to continuing difficulties, contradictions and even paradoxes and will not rise to historical challenges:

- Providing lifelong learning opportunities. Such a system cannot be built by simply adding one or two more links to the existing primary-secondary-vocational-tertiary education chain.
- Ensuring equal access to education for all, without exception. The more open the access to knowledge and skills that require effort, the less likely these skills and knowledge will be used in reality, while limited resources become spread too thin.

- Providing both equal access and a high-quality education at the same time. Both concepts have dozens of fundamentally different definitions. Without defining what exactly is meant and what the goal of the changes is, educational reform will make no sense.

- Undertaking widespread introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education. This should not mean new technological tools added to already existing ones, but radical changes in traditional education. If done carelessly, this can lead to the loss of theoretical learning and craftsmanship.

- Ensuring that graduates have marketable qualifications and skills. When a society lacks integration and order, such as Ukraine today, people who learn specialized skills can find themselves in a disconnected world. Orienting exclusively on the market can also make it impossible for the educational system to forward the development of the society as a whole.

- Ensuring the possibility of individual approaches in education. No educational institution can afford to have a complete range of teachers and courses or the entire set of methodologies and organizational processes that can meet this need. It is only possible to ensure some range of choices within the limits of a particular curriculum.

- Developing a knowledge-based society via education and to secure the financial sustainability of and growing investment in education. Under such an approach, education will increasingly turn to a big business and be guided more by commercial concerns—making profits—than by the principle of providing a public good.

## Job 1: Preserve diversity of approaches and practices

The author proposes a number of organizational principles for reforms. The presence of such principles makes it possible to achieve more transparent and clearly-defined policy, and these principles can be presented as an approach to decision-making and setting fixed limits. Setting limits is very important: it is impossible, for example, to

ignore the constraints of the existing educational system, to change traditions overnight, or to demand that people act against their own interests.

Educational policy means providing a range of possibilities within an ideology of diversity. Policy is also a game of competing approaches, concepts and tools that can cooperate to create a functional and sensible communicational structure. A philosophy of overcoming contradictions and paradoxes among isolated actions and generalized reforms is the basis for good educational policy. Undoubtedly, organizing transformation through policy is not the ideal approach, but at least it makes possible the preservation of diversity of approaches and practices. The centralized approach to transformation does not offer these possibilities: it can only ensure temporary advantages of speed and scale. Ultimately it will lead to a reduction in diversity. And, above all, it inevitably strips education of reflection and apprenticeship, the chance to replicate and widen human capacities to think and progress.

## Abstract

*Nikitin V.A., “Ideya obrazovaniya ili soderzhaniye obrazovatel'noy politiki,” Kyiv, Optima (2004), 205 pages (in Russian).*

The book consists of three main parts. The first, “An apologia for education” studies the historical genesis of the concept of education itself and its forms. This part also contains a description of fundamental changes in the content of and approaches to the organization of education during the transition from a scientific, knowledge and textual culture to a technological, informational and virtual culture. The second part, “Policy contradictions,” is devoted to different approaches, interests and recommendations regarding educational reform. It comments on the impossibility of coordinating these in the context of current insight into education and approaches to managing it and the need to develop mechanisms for educational policy. In the third part, “Appendix: The local nature of education,” the author shares his experience of working in educational pilot projects. ■

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