

Examining Access to Public Secondary Education in Almaty

Juldyz Smagulova, Elise Ahn, Maganat Shegebayev and Shirin Mussayeva*

Since its 1991 independence, Kazakhstan has been pro-actively pursuing numerous reform agendas. As evidence of an overall successful transition, its Gini coefficient, which measures overall social inequality, has decreased from 0.41 (2001) to 0.29 (2009), with overall poverty dropping to a reported 5.3% (2011) (World Bank, 2012). However, in order to continue pursuing a growth-oriented economic trajectory, the government has recognized the need to implement a milieu of education policies as per Strategies 2020 and 2050. Compulsory education reform is one of the focal points targeted for reform and has been identified as being crucial to developing sustainable socio-economic growth.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Urbanization. Almaty oblast is the second largest oblast in Kazakhstan (11.3% of the population), second to South Kazakhstan with 15.1% of the population in 2009. However, in 2009, Almaty city had 8.5% of the total population, making Almaty oblast (including the city), the largest oblast in Kazakhstan (19.6%) (OECD, 2014).

In terms of education, Almaty (city) is the largest school district in the country with 180 schools listed. The city allocates 16.6% of its local budget on education, while at the Almaty oblast-level, education makes up 36.3% of its budget with the nation-wide average being 30.1%.

As the city continues to expand outward to incorporate adjacent communities within Almaty oblast as part of the city, the Almaty city (*akimat*) education system will have to deal with the inequalities that exist between and within Almaty schools and the schools in the broader oblast. This includes things like physical infrastructure, # of classes, ungraded classes, access to teaching/learning resources, as well as issues related to school-home distance (OECD, 2014).

Systemic reforms. Major systemic changes that are being put into place include: the move to a 12 year education system, where the addition of the extra year is supposed to be designed to help students better focus on and prepare for university enrollment. Elite, publicly-funded pre-school through upper secondary schools, i.e., the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, are being built and opened throughout the country with the intention of providing top quality education for the country's best students. However, due to limited time, resources, curriculum and coordination within the Ministry of Education and Sciences and local education departments, systemic reforms are be-

ing implemented unevenly both in terms of scope (# of schools) and policy components. Additionally, as schools undergo renovation and reform policies are implemented, there is a lack of publicly available information for the public to be able to access and be engaged stakeholders.

Financing. In 2011, the government committed 3.6% GDP to public education. This is in contrast to other OECD countries, which spent about 5.4% (2009) (OECD, 2014). Table 1 (side bar) comparatively looks at public expenditure by the five Central Asian republics and the Russian Federation. And this amount is likely to be reduced based on the economic forecasts for 2015-2016.

Social change. Macro-level changes in the economic structure throughout the former Soviet Union countries. This has had ripple effects on labor, migration, and consequently, family structures. For example, there are large numbers of undocumented labor migrants that work throughout Central Asia. Some take their children and these children are not allowed to register in local schools. Changes in possible employment have also led to Kazakhstan having the highest single mother rate (approximately 19%) in non-OECD countries (OECD, 2014).

FINDINGS

Among our participants, we found that there was an observable relationship between students' educational aspirations and their school location, school language, gender, and family background.

Language of instruction. Our study also showed that while the overall number of Russian language of instruction schools was decreasing, the number of students enrolled remained approximately the same with no significant change. Moreover, when looking at the ethnic backgrounds of students at Kazakh vs. Russian schools, we found that while Kazakh schools primarily consisted of ethnic Kazakh students, Russian schools were much more diverse. This raises a number of issues related to social cohesion and integration, as well as the shape of language change in Kazakhstan.

School location. When looking at education aspirations and school location (by district), 9th grade participants in three city districts (i.e., the Alatau, Turksib, and Zhetisu districts) had significantly higher numbers of students reporting that they were not or unsure about taking the UNT. Ninth graders in those same districts overwhelmingly reported plans to go to technical/vocational schools after that year.

(continued on next page)

Summary

Since Almaty is the largest and most densely populated city in Kazakhstan and experiencing rapid rates of urbanization, this project focused on students in public, general secondary schools in Almaty.

The data was collected through a Kazakh and Russian language survey that was distributed among 9th-11th graders in 29 public secondary schools throughout all 7 Almaty districts. In total, 2954 students participated in the survey. Approximately even numbers of Kazakh and Russian language classes were collected.

The study found that when looking at two aspects of schooling, i.e., students' stated education aspirations (e.g., "Do you plan to take the UNT?" and "What do you plan on doing after this academic year?") and the language of the school/class they attended (Russian or Kazakh) a number of patterns emerged. These patterns were connected to things like where students lived vs. went to school and other aspects connected to family/family structure, as well as access to different resources, the range of education and labor market opportunities, as well as nationality.

Based on the findings from this study, the research team has provided four recommendations for policy makers and researchers for further discussion.

Table 1. Public expenditure on education in Central Asia (% share of GDP)

	Pre-P.	Comp.	HE	Total
KZ	0.2	2.3	0.4	3.1
KZ	0.3	2.1	0.3	3.6
KRGZN	0.5	3.6	0.9	5.8
TJN	0.2	3.1	0.4	4.0
TRKMN	--	--	--	--
UZBN	--	--	--	--
Russian Fed.	0.7	2.3	1.2	4.7
Region Avg.	0.4	2.8	0.7	4.4

Source: OECD, 2014, pp. 220-221.

This is as opposed to students in other districts whose reported plans were to continue to upper secondary. Not only in terms of reported education aspirations, but interestingly, students in these three districts also reported paying less for their textbooks but more in terms of total costs related to schooling than students from the other four, more centrally located districts.

Gender. The OECD (2014) noted that there the global trend toward the decrease in male engagement in post-secondary education is evident among Kazakhstani youth, where female students have demonstrated more motivation and incentive in continuing to higher education while a higher percentage of male students stop with compulsory education or go on to technical/vocational school.

This was reflected in our study as well. Not only were there higher proportions of females represented in 10th and 11th grades, but among 9th graders, 65.7% of female students said that they planned to take the national test (UNT) for university entrance vs. 58.9% of male students.

Family background. As aforementioned, the massive social changes that have taken place in Kazakhstan has had impacts on social structures (e.g., the family) as well. We observed that while the majority of students listed their father as the primary breadwinner, the mother was often listed as primary caregiver and support for homework, followed by grandparents. As “traditional” roles and family structures change, it’s unclear what impact this has on student learning.

This is particularly interesting as it connects to the increasing numbers of female students seeking to pursue higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from our project, we recommend the following:

1. Increasing the accessibility of publicly available information. *The lack of comprehensive and up-to-date information makes it difficult for the public to be engaged in discussions regarding education, which is a public good.*

2. School choice and language. *In order for school to help facilitate social cohesion, more work should be done to examine what differences currently exist among Kazakh, Russian, and other language of instruction schools and work to harmonize the school system.*

3. Formative evaluation examining what factors are contributing to increased gender disparity. *The way the gender gap is continuing to develop following the international trend toward more female students pursuing higher education needs further exploration in order to inform supplementary programs that might encourage male students to continue on to higher education.*

4. Needs assessments among single parent families. *The changing family structures has received little focus in discussions related to education and requires more research regarding their needs and issues.*

Authors

Juldyz Smagulova, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor and the Acting Executive Director of KIMEP University’s Language Center.

Elise S. Ahn, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor and Graduate Program Coordinator for the Master of Arts degree in Teaching Foreign Language at KIMEP University’s Language Center.

Maganat Shegebayev, D.BA. is an Assistant Professor and Research Coordinator at KIMEP University’s Language Center.

Shirin Mussayeva is an advanced graduate student in KIMEP University’s Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

This policy brief is based on a study titled “Exploring Emergent Education Equity in Almaty” which was funded by a grant during 2014 administered by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPJ). The study will be published in several journals and will be available upon request. Thanks also to the Almaty city Akimat for their permission to conduct the study and for support.

* The research team would also like to acknowledge that this research project would not have been possible without the hard work of the following people: Aigerim Kerimbekova, Marat Komekbayev, Aizhan Mukhitova, Kamilya Mukushova, Zarina Nazarybayeva, and Aizhan Zhanbergenova.

References

- Ahn, E., & Smagulova, J. (in-progress). A study of emergent education inequity in Almaty, Kazakhstan. [unpublished working paper].
- Aitzhanova, A., Katsu, S., Linn, H.F., & Yezhov, V. (2014). Kazakhstan. Toward a modern society for all 2050. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2014). *Reviews of national policies for education. Secondary education in Kazakhstan*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.
- Smagulova, J., & Ahn, E. (forthcoming). A window into education inequity: Language and school choice in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Special issue of the *Journal of Comparative and Development Education*.

