

# CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS OF PRIMARY AND NURSERY SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

This article addresses the issue of regional education development with an emphasis on evaluating the developmental needs of schools. It presents the results of a survey conducted to map the opinions of 25 managers of nursery and primary schools in a selected region of South Bohemia. The results show the current and future needs of schools, provide examples of good practice and the willingness of some schools to disseminate them. Data were collected and organized through focus groups, and group interviews combined with brainstorming sessions to record the opinions of group members. The focus was on three thematic areas: problems they need to address urgently in their school, problems they plan to solve in the future, and the problems they have successfully resolved which may serve as examples of good practice. For the evaluation, both qualitative aspects (identification of problems and needs) were captured and quantified. The results show unresolved staffing needs in schools, particularly the provision of specialists (school psychologists, school special educators) and a shortage of qualified teachers specializing in science and technology. In terms of good practice, some schools in the region offer positive experiences in both effective teacher training and working with heterogeneous class groups.

Keywords: Regional Education Development, Evaluating, Needs of Schools

<https://doi.org/10.11118/978-80-7701-082-5-0280>

JEL Code: I00, I22, R11, R58

## Introduction

The current development of regional education is characterized by the need to respond to dynamic changes arising from the reforms in the Czech Republic's educational policy, demographic trends, and labor market needs. High-quality mapping and evaluation of schools' developmental needs is an important tool for ensuring effective management and planning of the educational system's development at the regional level (Průcha, 2019; Walterová, 2018). This paper presents the results of a survey aimed at identifying the current and prospective needs of nursery and primary schools in a selected region of South Bohemia. Special emphasis is placed on evaluating the developmental needs of the participating institutions, highlighted examples of good practice, and on the schools' potential to share positive experiences with other schools.

## Theoretical Background

The issues of regional education development and the evaluation of schools' developmental needs stem from several key areas. These include theories of regional development, concepts of regional disparities, and the effectiveness of school management and leadership. These approaches provide a framework for effective planning, evaluation, and implementation of developmental measures within educational institutions. Equally important are aspects of networking and the strengthening of professional and personal networks among schools in the region, as mapping the potential of schools and their outstanding teachers creates an opportunity to achieve sustainable regional development and educational equity.

## Regional Development and its Dimensions

At the core of regional development is the effort to enhance the economic, social, environmental, and territorial cohesion of regions by identifying and eliminating existing barriers. Contemporary theories emphasize that regions are characterized by differing conditions and disparities (Blažek and Uhlíř, 2011). In the Czech Republic, regional disparities are significantly reflected in the area of school development. The quality of education is uneven, with poorer outcomes typically observed in northern Bohemia, the Karlovy Vary Region, and some parts of northern Moravia (Prokop *et al.*, 2021). Research data from PAQ

Research (Dvořák and Prokop, 2021) indicate correlations between the socioeconomic living standards of inhabitants in individual municipalities with extended powers (so-called ORP) and the quality of school education. In 72 % of these municipalities, the socioeconomic level correlates with the achieved level of education, yet in 14 % of them, despite adverse socioeconomic conditions, a higher quality of education is evident than would be expected under such circumstances. Thus, social and economic conditions are not always a determining factor.

An important concept is the understanding of regions as dynamic systems whose development is influenced by natural, material (infrastructure), intangible (innovation, ICT, institutions), and human factors (education, professional competencies). Institutional theories of regional development emphasize innovation, knowledge dissemination, and regional cooperation, with education and human resource development regarded as key investments (Blažek and Uhlíř, 2011; Hrabánková, 2011).

### Regional Disparities and Strategic Planning in Education

Regional disparities represent differences at the level of development between regions, which may be understood either as temporary (convergence theories) or permanent (divergence theories). For the effective design of developmental measures, it is essential to identify the underlying causes of these disparities. In the field of education, these often include limited availability of qualified teachers, limited professional support for schools, or a lack of institutional support from founders or the state (Kutscherauer, 2011).

Strategic planning in education is therefore based on the analysis of needs and developmental deficits using a combination of qualitative and quantitative indicators (Viturka, 2005; Faltová Leitmanová, 2012). Evaluation methods are used not only to collect data but also to design effective measures to remove barriers to development.

Among the factors that can help overcome differences in the quality of education across individual regions and municipalities with extended powers (ORP), the above-mentioned PAQ Research analysis (Dvořák and Prokop, 2021) identifies several areas. Based on examples of positive cases in the presented research on the relationship between the quality of education and the socioeconomic situation in municipalities, the authors highlight the following parameters of successful educational quality development:

- identifying problems and developmental needs of educational institutions in areas where the impact of the municipality's and region's socioeconomic situation on education quality is significant (analysis and resolution of negative case situations);
- utilizing best practices from municipalities and regions where, despite adverse socioeconomic conditions, the quality of education is successfully maintained and developed (transfer of specific best practices from positive cases);
- addressing specific socioeconomic factors affecting pupils' education (parental indebtedness, loss of housing and housing insecurity, material deprivation of families).

### Evaluation of Schools' Developmental Needs

The evaluation of schools' developmental needs represents a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing areas that require change or improvement. Effective school development management requires not only an accurate assessment of needs (personnel, professional, and material) but also the participation of all relevant stakeholders – school leadership, teachers, parents, and the wider community. Equally important is the establishment of platforms for sharing best practices and building networks among schools, which facilitates the dissemination of innovations and successful strategies (Janík and Knecht, 2021).

The issue of networking among schools, teachers, and education professionals has been addressed in the Czech Republic for an extended period. However, the networks that have already been established and are functioning still lack sufficient support or proper promotion to fully realize their potential. For instance, the network of teachers and education experts Edusif (National Pedagogical Institute, 2020) announced in 2020 its goal to connect 250 professionals across all regions of the Czech Republic in 11 thematic areas at the end of that year. By the next year, the website of the coordinating institution (National Pedagogical Institute, 2021) reported 210 registered experts, and as of now, the same number of professionals remains available on the official website (National Pedagogical Institute, 2025). This example illustrates that while it is possible to initiate the formation of professional networks and achieve the project parameters, it is quite a challenge to maintain these networks and further support their growth.

Among the key factors supporting the existence and development of networks are primarily high-quality school management that promotes teachers' continuous professional development and creates a safe environment for their professional growth. In this regard, Pražák and Dvořák (2022) assert that the Czech education system, characterized by a high level of decentralization, burdens school management with excessive administration, which leads to increasing disparities between schools and regions. A potential solution (Veselý, 2021) is the development of the so-called middle tier in education, where one of the state-established institute's tasks is to foster networking.

## School Management and Leadership

As already indicated, within a decentralized educational administration system, approaches to school management naturally emphasize the importance of school autonomy, the effective utilization of the school management's full capacity, and the participation of the entire community in managing the quality of educational processes. Research indicates that strong leadership at the school level (not only by the principal but also by the broader leadership team) is associated with better educational outcomes and enhances the school's response to changing demands. Theories of change in educational management emphasize the need for effective management of human, financial, and material resources, fostering a supportive and safe school environment, thus promoting participation and accountability (World Bank, 2018).

## Methodology

The aim of the research was to map the key needs of regional schools in the context of their personnel, material, and organizational development, while also identifying examples of good practice that could serve as inspiration for other educational institutions. A secondary objective of the survey was to document, for practical use, specific initiatives that schools in the target region are currently able to share and incorporate into networks.

The research was conducted during a professional meeting involving 25 managers from nursery and primary schools in the South Bohemian Region, specifically within the municipalities with extended powers (ORP) Tábor and Soběslav, under the Local Action Groups project. Participants were informed in advance about the objectives and procedures of the mapping and evaluation to ensure awareness of the study's purpose and data collection process. The actual data collection took place over a single day in two stages. In the first stage, three main thematic areas were discussed through focus groups:

- problems that need to be addressed urgently from the perspective of school management in the region;
- problems that schools intend to address in the long term;
- problems that have already been successfully resolved and can serve as examples of good practice.

With the consent of the participants, the discussion was recorded, and after transcription, the participants' statements were rewritten and categorized using the card-sorting technique. The collected data were then compared and supplemented with data from the second phase of the survey.

In the second phase, after the group discussion ended, all participants were asked to provide brief written responses to the above-mentioned questions on color-coded sheets. On these color-differentiated sheets, participants once again noted specific suggestions related to the discussed questions. The purpose of this approach was to achieve a high level of specificity in the formulation of identified problems and needs. During this phase, full participation was achieved. The record sheets for the first and second thematic questions were anonymous, whereas, for the third area (examples of good practice), participants were asked to include contact information of the school offering its example of good practice to others.

To collect and evaluate the data, a combined approach was used – qualitative analysis of participants' opinions was supplemented by quantification of the identified problems according to their frequency of occurrence. This approach made it possible to capture not only the depth of individual or institutional perspectives but also their relative significance within the dataset (Hendl, 2016).

## Results

The collected data are presented in three observed areas – current problems and needs, prospective problems and needs, and examples of good practice. Within these areas, common categories were identified, into which related concepts were grouped.

### Area of Current Problems and Needs of Schools:

- Category: Staffing of the school counseling center

The primary cause of concern involved difficulties in securing qualified pedagogical and psychological professionals within the so-called school counseling center. This center is intended to bring together teachers with specialized training (such as guidance counselors or student welfare specialists) along with other professional roles (such as school psychologist, special education teacher, social pedagogue). Their collective cooperation is one of the essential conditions for a functioning inclusive education system. Moreover, current legislation allows schools with a certain number of pupils to formally fill these specialist positions. The research indicates that schools in this region struggle to fill these roles – not because of lack of funding, but due to a shortage of qualified experts on the regional labor market.

- Category: Staffing of teachers in certain specializations

One major issue identified by the participants was the recruitment of teachers specialized in science subjects and informatics. In contrast to urban centers, regional schools lack foreign language teachers and native-speaking lecturers. This trend corresponds to long-term problems described in the educational labour market (Straková and Veselý, 2020).

- **Category: Support for schools**  
The participants expressed the need to improve communication with school founders – in most cases, municipalities and towns in the region. They also reported a need for access to high-quality legal and economic consultations to help schools address current challenges. The feedback clearly reflects the effects of the decentralization of school governance in the Czech Republic, where many expert functions (economic, administrative, and legal decision-making) fall within the responsibilities of school managers.

#### **Area of Prospective Problems and Needs of Schools:**

- **Category: Staffing of school teams**  
As previously mentioned, staffing of school teams appears to be the most significant long-term challenge for regional schools. This is related to the fact that many specialized positions within school counseling centers – the advisory system within schools – are filled through short-term contracts financed by various development projects. Consequently, even schools that currently do not face staffing issues feel uncertain about recruiting and retaining the positions of school psychologists or special education teachers within the next one to two years.
- **Category: Support and cooperation**  
From a long-term perspective, participants expressed the need to create a supportive network in which schools could mutually share concrete ideas, methods, and strategies for ensuring high-quality teaching. There is also a lack of a platform for obtaining reliable information in specific areas. Given that the survey participants hold school management positions, they viewed the network as primarily for sharing experiences with fundraising, accessing quality staff training, and connecting with trusted experts and consultants. This finding suggests that participants either do not use or are not aware of existing advisory and professional networks.
- **Category: Continuing education**  
Many schools indicated a need for systematic support of teachers' continuing professional development, with particular emphasis on methods for working with heterogeneous groups, developing inclusive approaches, and implementing modern forms of education.

#### **Examples of Good Practice**

Within the research, 23 responses were obtained from the 25 participating schools, meaning that the majority (92 %) of the schools involved were willing not only to present their problems but also to share their successes with others as examples of good practice. The positive outcomes represented the following categories:

- a functioning system of internal teacher training,
- an active approach to working with mixed classroom groups,
- sharing experiences through informal regional meetings of teachers.

The willingness to share proven practices was a strong indicator of the developmental maturity of individual institutions and their potential for creating regional networks of cooperation (Janík and Knecht, 2021).

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The presented findings confirm that regional education in the South Bohemian Region faces challenges similar to those of educational institutions in other parts of the Czech Republic – the greatest concern being staffing and the professional development of teaching personnel. Regions can thus be described as currently and prospectively vulnerable in terms of securing school psychologists, special education teachers, and qualified teachers in general. At the same time, the research showed a considerable potential for cooperation among schools, which can be effectively utilized within regional development strategies and projects (OECD, 2019).

From the perspective of regional educational management, the results provide a valuable foundation for planning support measures and for formulating regional development plans and projects. The evaluation of developmental needs is therefore significant not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a motivational and collaborative instrument for managing educational institutions.

The research identified both the current and prospective needs of schools in the South Bohemian Region and confirmed that the evaluation of developmental needs is an essential prerequisite for effectively improving the quality of regional education. The key focus remains the support of professional staff and the development of teachers' professional competencies. Examples of good practice facilitate the sharing of experience and strengthen networking among schools, which can significantly enhance the adaptability of the educational system to the changing social and economic conditions.

More skeptical assessments emerged in relation to the exchange of specific teaching tips, expert recommendations, and practical procedures. This suggests that the established network of contacts within the project would benefit from a dedicated platform that allows easy interaction

with documented examples of good practice in an accessible and up-to-date environment (e.g., an electronic platform or project website). In future evaluations, collecting opinions from parents and the general public poses a challenge, as this target group rarely participates in evaluations and typically only provides feedback on a few exceptional school achievements (such as parent-child clubs, community school activities, or school equipment improvements).

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