

# Conference on Education for All in Europe and North America

6 to 8 February 2000, Warsaw, Poland



## Eastern Europe: the fallout of the economic crisis

The whole education system of Eastern and Central Europe has been brutally shaken by the economic crisis gripping the region. Basic education remains more or less accessible to all, but its quality and functioning have been critically affected. Under communism, quality free education was a major success throughout the region. This is why its decline is all the more difficult to accept today.

For families, the change is radical. Many live in precarious conditions: since 1990 the number of jobs lost can be counted in the millions. In Russia alone, the number of unemployed increased from 2 to 8 million between 1994 and 1997. Almost everywhere, purchasing power has dropped drastically. In several countries, teachers are left unpaid for months at a time. In Bulgaria, Lithuania and Moldova, salaries in general have fallen to one-third of the 1990 level. And the cost of education, even when comparatively low, is higher than most poor families can afford.

To continue teaching often resembles heroism. In Russia, it takes from between three to ten months to get paid. Because their salaries are among the lowest of any professional category, most teachers are obliged to find a second job to have a decent income. Consequently, they no longer have enough time to guarantee quality education. Understandably, teaching no longer attracts competent, motivated professionals. Many teachers are leaving the profession. The recruitment of future teachers may soon be limited to men or women who are only motivated by retirement and social benefits.

For the want of a maintenance budget, schools are often dilapidated. Educational materials are extremely limited. New, good-quality textbooks have inadequate print runs. In Russia, one book is sometimes shared by four pupils.

Only the children of well-to-do parents now benefit from advantages which were previously free and available to all. Work in small groups,

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whole system from pre-school up. It implies improving teacher training, teaching and learning materials, learning achievement and drop-out, and the vast disparities between privileged urban and neglected rural schools.

Nor will these reforms come free. The falling birth rates in Europe are lessening the demographic pressure on education budgets, thus freeing up extra resources that can be channelled to deal with the real challenges of basic education. In some regions, the number of 3 to 6-year-olds has gone down by 10 per cent to 45 per cent. This is good news for education ministers who can now concentrate on quality.



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