

Selection and qualification of headteachers of educational institutions in the system of pre-school and school education

Head of the research group
assoc. prof. Yonka Parvanova
Members of the group
assoc. prof. Bozhidara Kriviradeva
PhD Student/R1 researcher Danko Kalapish
PhD Student/R1 researcher Deyana Milusheva



INTRODUCTION

Societal expectations and demands on the pre-school and school education system pose several serious issues and challenges for the organization and management of educational institutions. Since 2008, with the introduction of delegated budgets and the "money follows the student" mechanism, the role and functions of school and kindergarten principals have been significantly transformed. From administrators and managers at the operational level, they have become strategic managers of educational institutions, leaders and managers of financial, material and human resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The selection and qualification of principals in the pre-school and school education system should be an integral part of the overall education quality management policy and not just an administrative procedure implemented in the context of the Labor Code and other relevant normative documents. Following this credo, the methodology of the project is based on the concepts of principal as leader and decentralization of education management, which requires well prepared and selected managers in educational institutions.

The main objectives of the study is to analyze the system of selection and qualification of principals of educational institutions and to outline possible ways and mechanisms for its improvement in the context of high expectations for the management of preschool and school education.

RESULTS

In general, the selection methods applied in the course of the procedure are considered mostly appropriate by all three groups of respondents (principal, experts, teachers) (Parvanova et al., 2025, p. 342). The interview with the candidate, in which the defence of the concept of the institution's development and case studies occurs, is considered as the most appropriate in the course of selection. At the same time, the concept defense itself garnered the lowest score of the four methods included in the study. **Subsequent data analysis shows that the scores of RDE experts and principals, participating in the survey, are not homogeneous and there are significant differences among them (Table 1).** In the T-test conducted to compare the mean scores, particularly striking is the fact that the scores of the principals are statistically significantly lower for all selection methods compared to the scores of the experts, with the largest difference in the scores of these two groups specifically for the defence of the concept (score of 0.77 by the principals and 1.19 by the experts).

Table 1.

| Selection method | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean diff. |
|---|--------|---------|-----------------|------------|
| Written exam with a test | -3,211 | 293,287 | 0,001 | -0,316 |
| Interview with candidates | -2,064 | 302,706 | 0,040 | -0,157 |
| Case solving | -3,543 | 304,526 | 0,000 | -0,309 |
| Defence of the concept for strategic development of the institution | -2,983 | 312,615 | 0,003 | -0,423 |

Data from the focus groups indicate that it is the development and defense of a concept for the institution that proves to be the most problematic element in the course of the selection procedure. In addition, it is no longer seen by many head teacher candidates as part of the preparation for a management position in a particular institution, but as a mere formality.

"I've been 30 years in my school - how is someone from outside going to make a better concept than me?" (Headteacher)

"I saw a concept where the name of the school was not even changed - a copy-paste work" (RDE expert).

Approval for the test, taken by the candidates, is relatively high, although some questions are considered vague, ambiguous or misleading. For the experts, the test is a good option as long as the assessment of knowledge about the regulations is strengthened.

In relation to the assessment criteria, the participants were given the opportunity in the course of the survey to assess the extent to which the two main parts of the second stage of the competition - the concept defence and the case studies - could provide objective and sufficient information to assess the skills specified in the Regulations. The quantitative data from the survey indicate that, overall, both methods are highly rated as capable of gathering objective information to apply the assessment criteria set out in the Regulations (Table 4). The average method score was calculated for the whole sample (the three groups of respondents) based on the ratings of the suitability of the respective method for gathering information for the assessment of all the criteria specified. The reliability of the scale in both methods is confirmed by the high Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.934 for Defending a concept for the respective school and 0.928 for the Case Solving, which allows the calculation of an overall average method score.

Table 2.

| Selection criteria | The defense of the concept can provide objective information for the application of the respective criterion. | The defense of the concept can provide objective information for the application of the respective criterion. |
|--|---|---|
| Communication skills | 1,62 | 1,57 |
| Ability to seek and find solutions to problems | 1,52 | 1,54 |
| Attitude toward teamwork and continuous improvement | 1,52 | 1,48 |
| Knowledge of the regulatory framework | 1,51 | 1,55 |
| Motivation for taking the position | 1,42 | 1,33 |
| Sound reasoning of the proposals made during the defense of the concept | 1,38 | 1,22 |
| Vision for the long-term development of the institution and alignment of the concept with its specific characteristics | 1,25 | 1,07 |
| Consistency of the required financial, material, and human resources with the planned activities | 1,24 | 1,15 |
| Ability to present a concise and structured exposition of the concept | 1,13 | 1,09 |
| Average evaluation of the method | 1,40 | 1,33 |

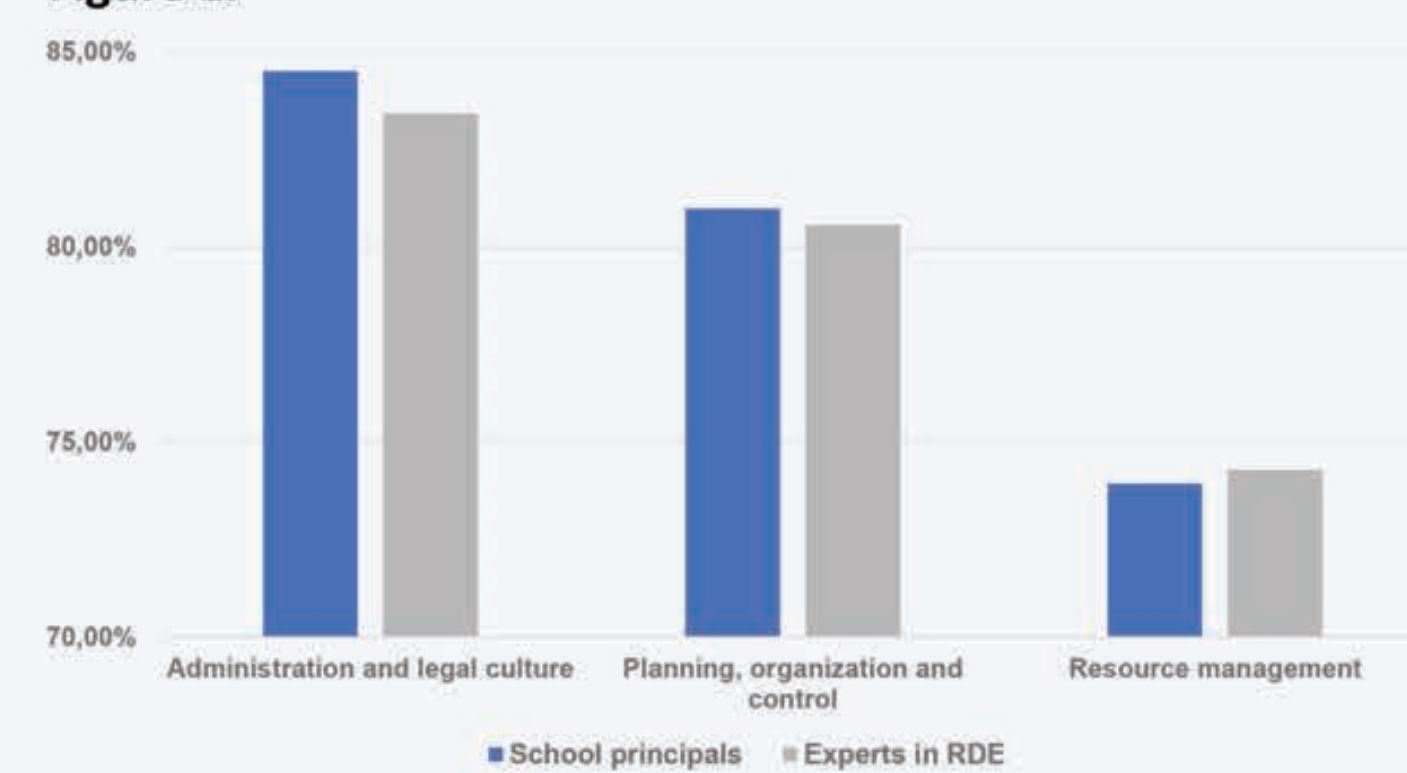
Controversy has also arisen over the composition of the selection committees and, especially about the inclusion of representatives of the Community Council of institutions, for which the candidates apply. While teachers strongly support the inclusion of the Community Council in the selection committee, principals and experts are much more reserved in their opinion. More than 55% of the principals consider the participation of this entity in the competitions for principals to be completely or rather inappropriate.

The main arguments, put forward by principals and RDE experts in the focus groups against the participation of the community council representatives as an equal voting participant in the committee are:

- lack of competence to assess the managerial qualities of the candidates;
- difficulties in setting up Community Councils, especially in small schools working with vulnerable pupils and parents with low socio-economic background, which makes it almost impossible to involve a representative of this body in the selection panel;
- the binding of the Community Council to a potential 'internal candidate' for the post;
- inability to attract and sometimes retain the representative of the Community Council for the second stage of the competition. "We had to close the exits of the RDE and go around the floors to make sure that all members of the public councils were present and able to participate in the interviews." (RDE expert)
- "We have no mechanism to compel them to participate." (RDE expert) "Nowhere is there any guidance on what happens to the interview process and the competition in general if the public council representative doesn't show up or doesn't participate in the process." (RDE expert).

Despite the stated intention that the selection procedure should seek educational leaders rather than administrators, administrative and legal culture emerges as a key competence for the future work of principals. Whether this is due to the fact that leadership skills in the competency profile are framed within social and civic competence and are not outlined as a separate category within managerial competence or rather reflects the practical reality in which principals carry out their work, becomes evident in the opinions shared during the focus groups.

Figure 1.



CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the research indicates that Bulgaria is on the right path in modernizing the selection and qualification of school leaders, but optimization is urgently required. Key improvements include revising evaluation tools to reduce formalism, ensuring regional relevance, enhancing transparency in selection committee structures, and creating an effective mechanism for finding leaders and visioners. Only by achieving such coherence between selection, qualification, and the real challenges of school management can the system secure leaders capable of driving innovation, ensuring equity, and fostering sustainable educational development.

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