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# International comparison of school principals: Czech administrative hell<sup>2</sup>

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## Summary

- School leadership is a serious problem in the Czech Republic. In this study, we document how a number of extremes converge at the level of elementary school leadership in the Czech Republic: **(i)** schools have substantial autonomy, **(ii)** school principals labour under very large administrative burdens, **(iii)** the average new principal is insufficiently prepared for the role, **(iv)** principals' salaries are relatively low and insufficient to attract strong candidates, and **(v)** there are a very large number of small schools, necessitating a large number of principals. This unhealthy combination of factors generates a significant problem for Czech schooling, of which only a narrow circle of experts has thus far been aware. For this reason, little progress has been made towards considering how problems might be solved or at least minimised.
- International comparisons demonstrate that elementary schools have greater independence in organizational, staffing, curricular and financial decisions in the Czech Republic than in most other countries. Local and regional authorities are involved only minimally in these areas, although schools are extensively regulated by law.
- The decentralisation of Czech schooling, i.e. the transfer of administration, decision-making and responsibility to lower levels in the system, i.e. to local authorities and individual schools, began in the early 2000s in connection with reforms of public services including the introduction of the legal identity of schools and establishment of self-governing regional authorities. Since 2003, all schools have been separate legal entities, which has given school principals greater autonomy in all areas, including financial resource allocation, school property maintenance, and staffing, and thus much greater responsibility.
- Despite their high level of autonomy, the extent of their administrative role, and the level of responsibility entrusted to them, a large percentage of school principals are insufficiently prepared or qualified when they take up the post. The Czech Republic lags behind the

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European average in terms of the share of school principals who were trained prior to taking the position. Indeed, a substantial proportion of Czech school principals have never completed any training or preparation course. For example, 42% of Czech principals have not completed a teacher training course, compared with an average of 12% of principals across Europe as a whole. This is an area of professional training in which Czech school principals feel they know too little and need to improve. On the other hand, a relatively high percentage of Czech school principals have training and/or qualifications in law, administrative management and other management-related tasks.

- These days, educational leadership is generally considered to be one of a principal's most important tasks, with substantial consequences for teaching quality and educational outcomes. This task includes observing classes, teaching pupils, mentoring teachers, coordinating and directing their ongoing professional training, coordinating curriculum content, developing teaching methods, making use of external resources, and etc. Czech principals spend on average just 15% of their working time on these tasks. Most of their time is occupied with administrative tasks and meetings (around 40%). Czech principals win first place among the European countries for having the heaviest administrative workloads. That workload is not the result of a lack of support staff in school leadership, but rather reflects the fact that the administrative burden placed on school leadership teams is disproportionate.
- The school principal's profession is insufficiently attractive in the Czech Republic. Czech principals' salaries are among the lowest in Europe relative to the salaries of other university-educated professionals. This is one factor behind decreasing interest in the profession, which has led to an ageing body of principals and growing difficulties recruiting new principals. There was only one candidate for approximately half of all principals' selection procedures during the 2017/2018 school year, and in approximately a quarter of cases, the selection procedure was essentially a formality.
- Almost half of all elementary schools in the Czech Republic have fewer than 100 pupils; this means that there is a relatively large number of small schools and thus rather a lot of principals are required. Furthermore, the Czech Republic's decentralisation of schooling and the greater autonomy and responsibility given to schools as a result have had significant impacts on principals of small schools; this has negative effects on the quality of school leadership and, in turn, on teaching quality.
- A combination of several measures can help to address these issues: **(i)** Encouraging smaller schools to merge at the leadership level or to form confederations of schools that can share certain aspects of their administrative organization. Not only could this result in bureaucratic economies of scale; it could also enable simpler and more effective use of teachers and other school staff and more intensive use of school premises and facilities, strengthen diversity in curricula, and reduce socio-economic selectivity; **(ii)** In smaller schools, providing administrative, technical, legal and other support. In larger schools, dividing up the principal's position to create two posts: educational director and technical director, with the latter taking on legal responsibilities; **(iii)** Carrying out a specialized procedural audit of schools' typical administrative workload and, based on that, streamlining that workload; **(iv)** Improving the quality of training provided to principals and other school leadership staff; **(v)** Raising and maintaining principals' salaries at a relative level equivalent to that of managerial positions in other sectors, and potentially introducing a career framework for principals.