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MANAGERIAL CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION (SCHOOL) DISTRICTS

Abstract. The article discusses the main aspects for the formation and development of such form of territorial education administration as an education (school) district. The main factors of its formation, especially in the conditions of decentralization reform in Ukraine are given grounds for. The structure and functions of the education district are studied. The recommendations on improvement of delegating, stakeholder relationships, reporting, resourcing, capacity building, planning, monitoring and evaluation, information system, school management are made.

Keywords: education (school) district, education management, decentralization reform in education, structure of education district, function of education district.

ВИКЛИКИ В УПРАВЛІННІ ОСВІТНИМИ (ШКІЛЬНИМИ) ОКРУГАМИ

Анотація. У статті розглядаються основні аспекти становлення та розвитку такої форми управління територіальною освітою, як освітній (шкільний) округ. Обґрунтовуються основні чинники його формування, особливості функціонування в умовах реформи децентралізації в Україні. Досліджуються структура та функції освітнього округу. Надаються рекомендації щодо вдосконалення делегування, відносин груп інтересу, звітування, ресурсного забезпечення, функціонування, планування, моніторингу та оцінювання, інформаційного забезпечення, управління.

Ключові слова: освітній (шкільний) округ, управління освітою, реформа децентралізації в освіті, структура освітнього округу, функції освітнього округу.

ВЫЗОВЫ В УПРАВЛЕНИИ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫМИ (ШКОЛЬНЫМИ) ОКРУГАМИ

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются основные аспекты становления и развития такой формы управления территориальным образованием, как образовательный (школьный) округ. Обосновываются основные факторы его формирования, особенности функционирования в условиях реформы децентрализации в Украине. Исследуются структура и функции образовательного округа. Даются рекомендации по совершенствованию делегирования, отношений групп интереса, отчетности, ресурсного обеспечения, функционирования, планирования, мониторинга и оценки, информационного обеспечения, управления.

Ключевые слова: образовательный (школьный) округ, управление образованием, реформа децентрализации в образовании, структура образовательного округа, функции образовательного округа.

Target setting. At present the expanding of economic and financial autonomy of educational institutes in Ukraine (with the simultaneous strengthening of their responsibility), which requires adequate legal, organizational and economic support is a necessary condition for efficient use of public resources in the education system. The sufficient institutional capacity of each educational institute leads to: restructuring of the educational network; consolidation of schools by

combining incapacitated, depleted, ungraded schools, vocational and higher schools including forming of school districts [2, p. 19].

The strategic direction of the society on strengthening the role of the regions, the need to develop theoretical and practical foundations for regional systems of education, scientific awareness of the impact of regionalization on the level of educational performance fostered the approving of the new Regulation on an Education (School) District

that regulates the creation, management and functioning of schools (within the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 777 of August 27, 2010).

Analysis of recent research and publications. The problems of education within the optimization of schools' networks are revealed in the works of O. Gavrilyuk, D. Deykun, D. Dzvinchuk, Yu. Lukovenko, N. Nychkalo, V. Palamarchuk, B. Proskunin, M. Romanenko, C. Sologub and others. The challenges of education (school) districts were studied by scientists (O. Bekh, L. Vaschenko, V. Hromovy, A. Mazak, I. Osadchy, H. Yelnikova and others), methodists of governmental departments, lecturers of post-graduate Institutes and employees of regional education structures. The issues of a combination "State and Community" in educational management were investigated by V. Bochkarev, A. Hoshko, B. Grabowski, G. Yelnykova, O. Zaichenko, L. Kalinina, S. Koro-liuk, G. Kostyuk, V. Knyazev, T. Lukina and others. In recent years educators and researchers have begun to examine school districts as the unit of analysis and change. School districts are seen as "potent sites and sources of educational reform" [9, p. 1].

Foreign findings are largely descriptive and based on case studies. The key themes of researches are interrelated and mutually reinforcing: effective leadership, quality teaching and learning, support for system-wide improvement, clear and collaborative relationships. The most recent review of the research literature on district leadership comes to the conclusion that "district-level leadership matters" in student's achievement [10].

The lack of complete and systematic native research of education institutes transformation and their consolidation to education districts within the region (oblasts and rayons) actualize the topic of the paper.

The purpose of the article. The aim of the paper is to reveal the managerial challenges of education (school) districts under decentralization in Ukraine using foreign experience as better practices.

The statement of basic materials. The National Strategy on Education Development in Ukraine until 2021, approved by the Decree of the President of Ukraine № 344/2013 of June 25, 2013 states that under difficult demographic and social conditions the modernization of educational institutes' network is provided for the purpose of more effective use of their logistical, human, financial and managerial resources, for ensuring the availability and quality of education. With this aim the search for alternative training models is done, including the creation of education (school) districts.

From August 2010 the functioning of education (school) districts is legally normalized by the Article 9 of the Law of Ukraine "On compulsory secondary education", which proclaims that cultural and educational needs of citizens may be a part of education (school) districts, unions, other associations, including the participation of educational institutes of pre-school, secondary, extra-curricular, vocational and higher education schools of various types and levels of accreditation, institutions of culture, physical culture and sports, enterprises and communities. The Regulations № 777 of 27.08.2010 "On educa-

tion (school) district” was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Thus, the results of parliamentary hearings “Education in rural areas: crisis tendencies and ways to overcome them” (March 14, 2012); the Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine № 4949-IV (June 7, 2012) with the approved recommendations; the “Guidelines on the Education District” which were approved by the Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 79 (January 20, 2016) are an evidence for high interest to the issue.

A school district is a voluntary association within the administrative territorial units of early childhood education, secondary, extracurricular, vocational and technical, and higher education, which seeks to create conditions for citizens in secondary education, implementation of pre profile and profile training, in-depth study of some subjects, ensuring the full development of the individual and institutions of culture, physical culture and sports, enterprises and NGOs [4].

An education (school) district is an innovative model of education management. It is not only a territorial entity, but strong logistical, educational and methodical base of highly qualified personnel. This is an effective factor in improving the quality of education.

Educational district management is carried out on the collegial basis by the Coordination Council of the District, which includes: the representatives of the City Education Department and of educational center, heads of all education (school) districts.

The activity of the education (school) district has three major areas: the activity of the management system;

the methodical work with the staff (both highly skilled and young teachers); close cooperation with pupils’ and parents’ groups.

Various governing bodies can function within the education (school) district. The methodical Council of the education (school) district provides: social studies; educational monitoring; consulting; coordination of methodical units activity of educational institutes of the school district; scientific-practical conferences; presentations of the district; supportive psychological services; district methodical performance; methodical trainings, seminars, workshops. The creative teaching laboratory on the issues of gifted students can be formed which provides: workshops, teaching classes; open sessions; advice activities; guidelines. The district office on career guidance proposes: social studies, diagnosis of professional orientation; monitoring of labour market; job fairs; meetings with interesting people etc. The various methodical associations (creative, problematic, dynamic groups) develop: guidelines, creative projects, presentations of creative portfolio, teaching cases, publications. The methodical advice office has such functions as: individual consulting; focus consulting; address methodical assistance; development of methodical publishing issues and journals.

Consolidation of schools within the education (school) district is compared with the process of optimization. Optimization of the school network includes the following steps: to identify leaders of optimization process; to collect and analyze data aiming to optimize the school network; to develop the scenarios for optimization; to de-

velop the scenarios for changes in the school network; to organize a campaign on informing and involving the public.

Beginning the process of optimizing of the school network, it is necessary to create a working-group involving all relevant stakeholders, which will be headed by the chairman of the community or an authorized representative. This working group should allocate responsibility for different components to optimize and monitor the process.

Since the school network optimization is technically complicated and politically sensitive, it should be fully open to the public and be provided under strong leadership. Indeed, without the unambiguous support of the community the chances for the significant progress in the optimization will be small.

The working group should collect and analyze data on: demographics; financial data of schools; information about schools infrastructure; information about the location of students and schools; data on teachers and non-teaching staff.

In accordance with the letter of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine № 2/3-14-1776-16 of 09.09.2016 “On normative legal regulation of education districts, supporting schools and their branches” [7] the Government amended the Regulation on Education District (the Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 574 of 31.08.2016), according to which:

- the concepts of “education district” and “supporting school” are split (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 79 of 20.01.2016);

- schools, regardless of their type and ownership, including compulsory secondary schools, (which are supporting institutes) and interschool training institutes are included into a school district. This provision legitimizes education districts which were established under the Guidelines on the Education District, which had operated until January 2016 (the Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers Ukraine № 777 of 27.08.2010 – the old edition);
- a school district is not a legal entity and operates on the basis of the decision on its creation;
- the name of the supporting school and its branches is carried out according to the requirements;
- admission (transfer) of students (pupils) to the supporting school and its branches is carried out in accordance with the law and is issued by the order of the principle of the supporting school.

The operating of the education (school) districts indicates that at present it is the only way to solve problems of rural schools in the complicated demographic situation. Minding the results of school districts’ activity, further implementation of legislation on regulating the education system in the country, ensuring the constitutional rights of citizens to education, fostering of appropriate conditions for qualitative compulsory secondary education, usage of modern educational technologies, development of socially mature personality, professional training of young people to self-determination, development of the network of educa-

tional institutes and public enterprises located within the administrative-territorial units, improvement of human resources and logistics, the education departments develop a Roadmap for the creation of education (school) districts.

In 2016 an act on “Supporting schools” aimed at optimizing the network of schools by converting schools with small contingents of students into the branches was run. The supporting school is a teaching center to train leaders and teachers of the affiliated schools to improve the educational process, to bring it into the compliance with the modern requirements and needs. The supporting school is solving a set of problems today.

The creation of 139 supporting schools (in 2016) is positioned as reform measures to improve the quality of school education and to use local budgets more efficiently [2, p. 23].

The functioning of school districts is a wide world practice. There a school district is a form of special purpose district which serves to operate local schools. It is a corporation created for the sole purpose of performing one public function — education management. The wide recognition of school districts is that school systems are divided into districts because localized administration and policy making are more efficient and more responsive to community needs. School districts is a form of local government arrangement in the US, UK and Canada. These countries have school and special districts. They do not coincide with the administrative territorial division but were formed due to natural causes and natural factors. For example, in the US

there are 14,741 school districts and 29532 special districts [1, p. 47]. School districts are mainly created to separate education from politics. They combine most of the schools (approximately 90 % of all schools), independent of local counties and municipalities. School districts in the USA are expected to tie decisions on tenure, promotion, and salary for individual teachers. States around the country are now in the process of requiring districts to implement teacher evaluation systems, often with short time frames and much of the decisions on design and implementation left to each school district where there are individual differences in the quality and skills of their management teams. Many reform initiatives are focused at the district level in the sense that they are intended to disrupt the school district’s monopoly in delivering publicly funded education services which include charter schools, vouchers, online education, and school portfolio management models. The reform is focused on strong leadership oriented to student achievement, which is connected with individual schools, teachers, curriculum, and parental choice of where to educate their children. If reforms are to work, they must be carefully adapted for each community, school, and classroom. Because everyone has a role to play in improving the academic performance of all students, leadership must be distributed throughout the district [11]. However, for distributed leadership to be effective, teachers, principals, central office administrators, school board members, and teachers’ union leaders must understand the nested nature of school organizations [10, p. 1].

In Ukraine school districts are at the center of public attention, public policy on decentralization and on education reform. Speaking about school districts, we mention, first of all rural areas. Educational practice shows that providing quality education for rural children is possible under cooperation of educational institutes into the education (school) districts. The subjects of a school district are not only schools, but also cultural, sports, and pre-school institutions, health care facilities located in the territory.

The Recommendations of the Parliamentary hearings on the topic “Education in rural areas: crisis tendencies and ways to overcome them”, which were approved by the Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine № 4949 of June 7, 2012 aiming to ensure equal access of citizens to quality education, to strengthen the role of the spiritual, economic, social, innovative and social development for the State and the Society the oblast state administrations were recommended to develop, adopt and ensure the implementation of oblast and rayon med-plans on education (school) districts development [6]. In the functioning of rural area schools the crisis tendencies are observed due to objective reasons: changes in the infrastructure of the village; demographic situation in rural areas, leading to a sharp reduction in class size and, consequently, to suspension or closure of small schools; insufficient logistical and personnel support of rural educational institutes. As the result, the quality of educational services is not provided fully. The Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 675-p of September 5, 2012 approved the Guide-

lines for drafting regional plans on education (school) districts creation and updating of the network of vocational, secondary schools, including boarding schools.

The theme of school districts is becoming more and more popular within such topics as: effective leadership (focus on students learning, dynamic and distributed leadership, sustained improvement efforts over time); quality teaching and learning (high expectations and accountability for adults, coordinated curriculum and assessment, coordinated professional development, quality classroom instruction); support for system-wide improvement (effective use of data, strategic allocation of resources, policy and program coherence); clear and collaborative relationships (professional culture and collaborative relationships, clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities, interpreting and managing the external environment). To solve these issues the work of school and district leaders has to be changed dramatically and rapidly, due to the demands of external accountability, including standards-based reforms at the regional level and the national taking into account environment, resources, management.

A school district's *environment* includes all of the external factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations, and performance. The environment includes the various funding sources available (both public and private); the political and policy contexts at this or that territory (in this or that community), city/township/village, rayon, oblast, and national levels; the collective arrangements and the cha-

racteristics of the particular community. Oblast, rayon and school leaders have little direct control over the environment, they must spend significant time trying to manage its effects. The environment plays a major role in the quality education. For example, rural areas are not always supplied with facilities, which promote communication and the use of educational aids. The poor state of many rural roads makes access to some schools difficult. The re-deployed graduates of pedagogical institutes find it difficult to obtain housing in rural areas. Schools in rural areas receive little support from the education departments and they are inefficient in terms of infrastructure.

At many rural schools, the lack of physical (material, financial) and methodical (learning) *resources* is a serious problem. The majority of schools were built in Soviet times, which means they consist of buildings without any modern facilities.

Despite being deprived of facilities, some schools achieve excellent results (regarding final exams) while others with better facilities have low results of their activity. We connect that largely with the quality of the *management* of the schools, especially the management exercised by oblast and rayon departmental heads and school principals. There is direct relationship between well-performing schools and the management style and active participation of school principals in the management of the schools. Besides, visits and management assistance of oblast and rayon managers can ascertain the actual quality of education at schools under their jurisdiction. Oblast and rayon departments may even not know the

school needs in learning material and physical facilities as they not always aware of what is going on at schools in certain areas. The communication between the various local education departments and schools is also not satisfactory. Under decentralisation reform nowadays some schools have made good progress with transformation and have accomplished a lot with the few resources available to them. In order to share such good practices communicative events of oblast and rayon levels should be held to exchange ideas and experience.

Recommendation on delegating, stakeholder relationships, reporting, resourcing, capacity building, planning, monitoring and evaluation, information system, school management [10] include the following.

Delegations. Education (school) districts play a pivotal role in the effective functioning of schools. Through adequate resourcing of districts, decentralisation of regional (oblast and rayon) authority to districts and capacities of district staff, an improvement of administrative and education services delivery could be achieved, resulting in improved performance of schools. The process of decentralisation of educational powers and authority to the local level should be accompanied with capacity-building efforts, especially in the area of human resource and financial management, procurement and general administration.

Stakeholder relationships. Stakeholders have a legitimate interest in the schools and can influence the success of the education (school) district's strategy. These include teachers and their unions, parents, students, school

boards, community and local NGO's and local politicians and policymakers. Stakeholders often disagree about what success in educating students looks like or how to achieve it. Local leaders must either persuade a majority of stakeholder groups about the efficiency of their actions or build a sufficient alliance among some that will prevent the others from becoming a disruptive force.

Reporting. Bureaucratic delays will be avoided once the decentralisation of powers and functions has been completed. In that case the appropriate communication between oblast, rayon and school staff should be established.

Resourcing of districts. Money is usually the first thing education leaders think about when resources are mentioned, and money is obviously important. But organizational resources also include people, time, and other assets such as technology and data. Education (school) district leaders must allocate the full range of resources coherent with the district's strategy. This means being knowledgeable about which current and planned activities receive necessary resources and which do not.

Capacity building. Schools are undergoing relevant changes under the transformation policies in the country. Oblast, rayon and school staff needs to acquire new skills to function effectively. Oblast and rayon managers and city/township/village officials should achieve a certain level of management competence so that they can effectively support schools on management. The employees of governing bodies have to be trained on their roles and responsibilities. Governing bodies should be

improved so that they can participate more effectively in school affairs.

Planning. The support programmes and activities of the education (school) district office should be reflected in the schools' annual programmes. These programmes and activities should be based on school needs. The priority needs of each school should be taken into account when compiling the strategic and operational plans of the education (school) district concerned. A yearly assessment of needs should assist districts in their planning.

Monitoring and evaluation. Not all district and school staff has been trained in the use of the monitoring and evaluation instruments. It will take some time before they are able to implement these systems. For now the district should develop a monitoring and evaluation system that can be used in assessing the performance of schools based on clear performance indicators.

Conclusions. The introduction of such a mechanism in Ukraine as education (school) districts would enable the expanding of educational services and transparency aiming to increase the interest of the community in solving its own logistic needs of the schooling. In this case the following recommendations can be made: oblast and rayon education departments should give strategic attention to the reallocation of resources, especially to rural schools; the departments should modernise their operational processes with specific reference to information exchange (to and from schools) and provide the appropriate support of schools; the relevant standards should be set for the implementation of quality education at school level. TQM (Total Quality

Management) system is to be implemented at the departments aiming to provide qualified performance measurement and comparison of schools.

In the conditions of the national economy development the formation of education (school) districts in the regions Ukraine will help to find the necessary reserves in improving the quality of educational services. In addition, by saving costs and providing “cheaper” maintenance of their infrastructure will enable the purchase of equipment, attracting of new technologies into the educational process according to labour market requirements and standards of European education.

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