

Factors that Hinder the Completion of Compulsory Education: The Latvian Experience

By

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1. The society and people with insufficient education

Alongside with the rapid economic development and political changes, notable achievements of the Latvian state, the society is increasingly facing the manifestations of insufficient education level of its population, and its impacts on the human welfare.

In the recent years the number of illiterate persons has increased in Latvia; there are a considerable number of people who have not acquired sufficient general and vocational education. Among the group of 20 – 29 year olds¹, as compared with the older segment of the population, the proportion of people who have only elementary education has increased. The same applies to those who are illiterate, have not attended school at all, and who have only the experience of the first stage of basic education (4 grades). In the group of 20 – 29 year olds there is a relative decrease of people who have received secondary vocational education, i.e. have become artisans.

The poor level of education has an impact on employment opportunities. More than 20% of the young people aged 15 – 24² are unemployed, which is by 8.7 % more than the average level of unemployment in the country.

The level of education of an individual is the factor in their further involvement in lifelong education. The statistical data reflecting the situation in Latvia confirms the tendency³ that a higher level of formal education is the basis for continuing to acquire knowledge and skills out of the formal education system.

The education process is also influenced by the external factors, which include the place of residence, and the relative level of the family's welfare. Education in Latvia is not accessible for all.

The indicators reflecting the income of the population in Latvia, and the level of unemployment are quite differing across the regions of Latvia. The highest level of income is in the households of the city of Riga (the capital) and its region. There the level of income is increasing, in comparison with the country areas, where the income is decreasing. A particularly severe situation is in the eastern part of the country (Latgale) where the density of population is lower than in other parts of Latvia, unemployment is high, education level is relatively low, and the proportion of elderly population is higher⁴.

The material welfare of the family is directly related to the accessibility of education, which is linked to the ability of the family to invest finances in education. Affluent families in 2003 spent 7 times more funds for the education of each household member, as compared with lower-income households⁵. The same applies to cities, where the population have more income and they spend on education 2.4 times more than people in rural areas.⁶

Accessibility of education is also illustrated by the fact that 51% of people who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion admit that they are in a situation where the lack of funds has prevented their children from participating in school and class activities. Thus the lowest share of funds can be invested in education in single-parent households, as well as households where there are 3 and more children, since they have a considerably lower income.⁷

¹ The Data calculated from 2000 Census in Latvia. Statistical Bulletin. Riga, 2002, p. 188.

² The Data of the Ministry of Welfare

³ CSP Mūžizglītības aspekti Latvijā. Statistisko datu krājums. Rīga, 2004,13.lpp. [CSB. Aspects of Life-Long Education in Latvia. Statistical Bulletin.]

⁴ Analysis of National Education Policies. Report of OECD experts, www.Source.OECD.org

⁵ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Household Budget, in Statistical Bulletin. Riga, 2004

⁶ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Household Budget, in Statistical Bulletin. Riga, 2004

⁷ A Study on Social Exclusion, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia, 2003

People with insufficient education are the group that faces the risk of social exclusion. Insufficient education of the population is one of the gravest problems that reproduce poverty and social exclusion. Thus two groups of Latvian population that face the gravest risk of being excluded from the labor market are school dropouts, alongside with ex-prisoners⁸

People with insufficient education as the group at risk of social exclusion are characterized by poor awareness of social safety-net guarantees, limited access to the state-provided support measures to increase their competitive advantages or low activity in participating in these activities, low professional skills or their absence, low trust in the government and local authorities. Thus insufficient education is directly linked to other social problems and to improve the situation, solutions must be complex and comprehensive.

The strengthening of the value of knowledge-based society, in which every member has lifelong education opportunities, is a significant task of Latvia's policy-makers. It is planned to tackle the problem of insufficient education by providing opportunities for mastering basic skills to all subjects of education under the age of 18, increasing the accessibility of general education. This includes the implementation of programs of pedagogical adjustment for those with low education level, and expanding programs of vocational education.⁹ The reform of general education is being continued in Latvia, envisaging the transformation of orientation from cramming vast amounts of information to information processing skills, focusing on knowledge and skills useful for practical life, inclusion of modern subjects in the curriculum, integration and alignment of subject content to achieve un-cluttering, decrease inconsistencies and duplication¹⁰. Alongside with the development of general education, goals for vocational education have been set. These include the need for promoting adult education, opportunities for acquiring additional qualification, to prepare skilled labor force for issue areas important for the development of economy¹¹.

The most noteworthy practical achievements of the recent years is the introduction of programs of *pedagogical adjustment*, the improvement of education opportunities in close institutions, improvement of accessibility of vocational education, including the activities implemented by the State Employment Agency. This has allowed for extended opportunities for acquiring new qualifications and upgrading existing ones for various groups at social risk.

Although several policy documents have been adopted to develop education, they have not been completely implemented for the lack of continuity of the policy process and other reasons. The alleviation of the problem of insufficient education is hindered by rapid turnover in the government¹², poor coordination, procrastination in implementation of reforms, inability to focus on concrete priorities, which in turn impact the budget decisions – the needs of concrete groups and education priorities are not included in budgeting decisions. A significant problem is the lack of qualitative information on insufficiently educated people in Latvia and their needs. The statistical data available is often of poor quality or even inconsistent; there is a lack of academic research, which would provide a broader insight into the problem of insufficient education and the opportunities of solutions.

2. Compulsory education in Latvia

Compulsory education

⁸ A Study on Social Exclusion, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia, 2003

⁹ Educational Development Concept Paper, 2002-2005

¹⁰ The Centre for Curriculum Development and Examinations, Ministry of Education. The State Compulsorily Education standards p. 3.

¹¹ Single Programming Document, 2004 – 2006

¹² For example, during the 15 years of independence Latvia has had 12 Ministers for Education and Science.

The education system in Latvia is regulated by the Education Law; the implementation of the education process is determined also by the general Education Law and Vocational Education Law.¹³

The following levels of compulsory education are distinguished:

- Pre-school education, preparing 5 and 6 year olds for school (become effective September 1, 2003);
- Compulsory basic education or 9 grade education. The law requirement is relevant until the age of 18 or until the moment when an individual has received the document (certificate) confirming the completion of the compulsory basic education course.

As of year 2004, the basic education certificate is not given if the person in the course of studies or the state examinations has failed to obtain assessment, or has obtained unsatisfactory assessment (e.g. below 4 points in 10 point scale) in more than two state examinations or unsatisfactory final marks in more than two subjects. The individual then receives a report card only and that does not certify the completion of compulsory education. Therefore those students have to seek the ways how to complete the compulsory basic education and get satisfactory marks. The government had offered the following options: to repeat the grade in the same/ or another school, go to the evening school, to enter specially organized pedagogical adjustment classes, or to attend some vocational schools. However the clear procedures how to follow up those students are not yet established and there is no clear statistic on how many of these children eventually complete the compulsory schooling with the second attempt.

The education system also includes special education, which means education for individuals with special needs and health challenges, or general/vocational education adjusted to such people.¹⁴

In carrying out the teaching process, on a number of occasions special programs are envisioned – programs of *pedagogic adjustment and social adjustment*. By pedagogic adjustment program a certain education program is meant – one whose methodology and organization is adapted to individuals within the age group to receive compulsory education and who need to improve their knowledge on basic education curriculum subjects. Social adjustment programs mean education programs whose methodology and organization is made suitable for individuals within the age group to receive compulsory education and who experience social behavior challenges.

Repeated studies in the same grade for a second year¹⁵

Students are transferred to the next grade if they have received satisfactory assessment on all study subjects. In the cases when students fail to fulfill the requirements of the subject standards and do not receive assessment, or receive one that is lower than 4 points, they, in accordance with the decision of the school's Pedagogical Council, may apply for repeated tests during the summer recess. Should they receive successful assessment then, they may be transferred to the next grade; if not, the student remains in the same grade level for a second year. The Pedagogical Council, based in unsatisfactory fulfillment of the standards, may decide that the student has to remain in the same grade for a second year, not offering the opportunity for repeated tests.

Selection and change of school

¹³ Adopted on June 10, 1999.

¹⁴ The Law on Education

¹⁵ The procedure of enrolling children in school, moving to the next form and the procedure for changing school is defined by the Instruction No. 7 issued by the MES on November 27, 2003

According to legislation, the basic education has to be obtained in maximum proximity to one's place of residence. At the same time, the student's parents have the right to choose the school in the territory of the same or another local government. The change of school may be initiated by parents, submitting to the school administration a written request. In its turn, the school may complete the documentation for a child's transfer to another school only after their acceptance is guaranteed, which has to be confirmed in writing by the principal of the receiving school.

The change of school, when it is not related to the change of the place of residence, is most often carried out in the following circumstances:

- For social-psychological disagreements either between the student and the peers or between the student and the teachers;
- When the student has to remain in the same grade for a second year and it is too difficult to return to the environment that underscores their failings;
- Change of school is suggested because of the student's study results or/and unacceptable behavior.

Expulsion from school

Should the school intend to expel a person under the age of 18 acquiring compulsory basic education, this decision may be carried out only after agreement with the local government in whose territory the child lives.¹⁶

The reasons for expulsion may be as follows: the child's family is leaving the country, the child's death, or criminal penalty with imprisonment.¹⁷ The process of expulsion is a complicated one; even in cases when the child has not attended school for a year and is being searched for by the police, they cannot be just expelled from the school.

Should the child live and study abroad, the following procedure has to be carried out: the parents have to submit this information in written form to the school's principal. In the cases when the absence is less than one year, a note is made in the school's documents accordingly; however the child is not ex-matriculated. Only in cases when the child is continuing studies abroad for more than a year and the child's parents submit a request, the principal may issue a decision to ex-matriculate the child from the school.

Drop-outs and those on the verge of dropping-out

The education system gathers data on the children who are within the age group of compulsory education and yet do not attend school. In the end of the study year education establishments submit the information on students not attending school for a prolonged time to the Ministry of Education and Science. This report include the indicator: students who have not attended school more as an half of the study year.

Another set of data on the level of involvement in the education system is the number of children within the age group of compulsory education (this is done by the Register of Population), and the number of children who have been registered with education establishments (this is done by education establishments and the information is gathered by the Ministry). The difference between these two sets of data points to drop-outs from the formal education system.

¹⁶ The Law on Comprehensive Education, article 32-5.

¹⁷ G. Kurlovičs, I. Muraškovska, A. Vilciņa, S. Pamatizglītības ieguves iespējas bērniem ārpus izglītības sistēmas. Izglītības reformas Latvijas sabiedrības integrācijai un labklājībai. Pārskats par izglītību 2003./2004. SPC „Providus”, Rīga, 2004. [Primary Education Opportunities for Children Outside the Education System. In: Education Reforms In Latvia: Underpinning Integration and Prosperity. Education Report, 2003/2004]

This report uses terms dropouts and on the verge of dropping out. The child who has dropped out from the education system – a student who has not received complete compulsory basic education and does not attend school any more.¹⁸

Those on the verge of dropping out – students who have not attended school for at least for the half of the school year and thus cannot fulfill the requirements of compulsory basic education.¹⁹

3. Institutions involved in providing education and their cooperation

The Ministry of Education and Science is the key institution which administrates education in Latvia. The mandate of the Ministry includes the following issue areas²⁰:

- development of study standards and education programs,
- monitoring of the work of schools,
- coordination of teachers' in-service training, etc.

Most schools that provide compulsory basic education are under the administration of *local governments*, who in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Science establish, reorganize and liquidate schools, ensure that all children of the relevant age living in the local government territory have a place in a school, maintain children's register, etc.

The funding of education is also split between the central and local governments. The central government covers the salaries of teachers, the salary of the school's psychologist and all social payments. The local governments provide study materials, maintain the school premises, provide for renovation, and cover the salaries of the technical staff, as well as the social pedagogue.

The local governments are also required to provide premises and other necessary means for alternative modes of basic education: evening classes in basic education and programs of pedagogical and social adjustment; the central government only covers the costs of the pedagogical staff.

As relates to *pedagogical adjustment* programs within vocational basic schools, all costs are covered by central government budget.

Other institutions may participate in providing support measures for accessing basic education. If the concrete local government has sufficient funds and there are relevant *support structures and institutions* (e.g. The Center for Children's Rights protection, social services, day-care centers), additional support may be provided to families and children. Some local governments form *multi-disciplinary teams*, where the relevant professionals engage in solving topical problems, thus facilitating the acquiring of basic education and preventing truancy. However the number of such local governments is not considerable.

Schools have *Parents' Councils*, which have predominantly consultative functions. Each school also has the *Students' Parliament* (Council), which is comprised by active and motivated young people who help to organize the school life.

Although the participation of NGOs across Latvia in addressing topical issues is insufficient, there are several positive examples which attest to the NGO contribution in developing the support systems for children and young people. NGOs, in cooperation with schools and local government institutions implement projects that promote social inclusion in schools, the providing of systematic and coordinated support to children, motivating children

¹⁸ Definition of the Drop out project team from Latvia

¹⁹ Definition of the Drop out project team from Latvia

²⁰ According to the Law on Education

and their parents to participate in the education process, thus identifying the potential of NGO involvement.

4. Information sources on education

Indicators related to institutions and education

Information about the process of acquiring education and the factors that impact it in Latvia is gathered by the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) of Latvia, and the Ministry of Education and Science. In particular cases institutions of city governments, as well as Education Departments of Latvia's administrative districts carry out independent gathering and analysis of education-related data.

Alongside with that, the society can get information from the annual Reports on Human Development produced by the UNDP, which among others address education issues. The results of a number of international comparative surveys provide important information on the education process. Notwithstanding the fact that various data and sources are available, the information on the compulsory education process is not complete, and the gathered data sometimes is self-contradicting and hard to interpret.

The Ministry and the CSB prepare annual reports that include statistical data relevant to the education process. Following is a section of indicators that characterize the education situation in Latvia:

- The number of children within the age of compulsory education (the data is gathered by the Register of Population), and the number of children who are registered with education establishments (the data is gathered by education establishments and the Ministry). The number of children within the age of compulsory education who have not been registered with any education establishments, who do not attend school and have not completed basic education.
- Education establishments (including the number of schools and vocational schools) and the number of students.
- The number of persons attending education establishments by education levels (including elementary school and basic school), age groups (by the years of age: 3-6; 7-10; 11-15, 16-18), gender and the language of instruction (Latvian, Russian, other).
- The breakdown of students in general schools by grades, cities, administrative districts, the number of students in regular schools and evening general education schools.
- The number of students repeating the grade as broken down by grade groups in general education schools.
- The number of students expelled from general education schools, broken down by grade, gender and location (city/district).
- The number of graduates of general education schools, grades 1 – 12, by administrative districts, language of instruction and gender. The number of students who have graduated from grade 9 (by the type of document received – a list of grade results or a certificate of completed 9 grade education).

Other surveys carried out by the CSB include statistical data pertaining to education system:

- Reports on economic development in Latvia include information on expenditures on education from the state consolidated budget.
- Household surveys include expenditures on education. This data is available in a number of aspects: urban/rural, administrative districts, education level of the main income provider, etc.

- Labour force surveys include information on the age groups and education level of the employed and unemployed.

An important source of information is the sections on education in the UNDP Human Development Reports, surveys on labor market trends (the influence of education on employment opportunities and the risk of unemployment), other surveys. Regular international comparative surveys on education (e.g. PISA, TIMSS) are carried out in Latvia.

5. Completion of compulsory education: analysis of available statistical data

To grasp the problem of insufficient education in Latvia, this section will analyze the available statistical data and view the results of several studies carried out in Latvia. The information thus gathered attests both to the acute nature of the problem and to the causes of this condition. In addition, analysis points to deficiencies of education policy and practices, when addressing the problem of dropouts from the formal education system.

Official Statistical Data

The main sources of statistical data on education in Latvia are the Ministry of Education and Science, Central Statistical Bureau (CSB), and local school boards and municipalities. Analyzing the basic indicators on education gathered by the CSB for the academic year 2003/2004 (see Table 1), it must be noted that a considerable number of children within the age of compulsory education are not involved in attaining basic education.

Table 1. Basic Indicators of Education

Stage of Education	Age	Number of persons attending institutions of education	Number of inhabitants attending the program of the specific education level, % of the total number of inhabitants in the specific group	Number of inhabitants in the specific age attending the program of the specific education level, % of the total number of inhabitants in the specific group
Pre-school education	3 - 6	62811	80.4	78.0
Elementary school	7 - 10	84369	104.2	94.9
Basic education	11 - 15	162001	100.4	91.8

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Education Institutions in Latvia at the Beginning of the School Year 2004/2005. Statistical Bulletin. Riga, 2005., p. 17. - 18.

However this information on the number of children, who are not involved in compulsory basic schooling, is quite imprecise, as the register data of children in the age of compulsory education varies between the Ministry of Education and Register of Population in Latvia.

Table 2. Registration of Children who have Reached the Age of Compulsory Education (born in 1987 – 1998) in 2003

All children who have reached the mandatory age according to the data of Population Register	Registered at the institutions of education		Do not learn and have not completed basic education		Not registered at the institutions of education	
	Number of children	Percentage of the total number	Number of children	Percentage of the total number	Number of children	Percentage of the total number
331121	314344	94.9	2526	0.8	11432	3.5

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. *Children in Latvia 2004. Statistical data collection. Riga, 2004. p. 23*

The percentages and absolute numbers indicate that 95% of the children in the age of compulsory schooling have been registered with education establishments. However 4.3% children have not been registered, do not attend school and have not completed compulsory basic education. Reviewing this breakdown, it can be noted that the Register of Population has data on 0.8% children, who are not accounted for in the Ministry data. The authors of the Report did not succeed in obtaining information which would describe reasons for not registering such a proportion of children who are obviously out of school. One may presume that:

- Since inhabitants of Latvia may declare their place of residence freely, the register of local governments is imprecise; it may well be possible that a proportion of children are not registered there.
- The data on pre-school education age children is not registered in full, and since the above data includes children from age 5, a proportion of them are not registered with education establishments.
- A number of children have left the country for indeterminate time, and thus are not registered with education establishments. For example, 3373 children left Latvia with their parents in 2003 ²¹, it is not known if they are acquiring education in other countries or are not receiving any schooling at all.

Alongside with the number of dropouts of compulsory education age, a considerable proportion is truanting for extended periods of time.

Table 3. Truants

Academic year	Unjustified non-attendance			Do not learn at all
	Approximately half of the academic year	Almost all the academic year	Total	
2003/04	2706	1803	4509	1878
2002/03	1859	977	2836	2515
2001/02	1224	742	1966	1755
2000/01	974	632	1596	1824
1999/00	951	530	1481	2607
1998/99	1001	639	1640	...

Source: The data of the Education State Inspectorate and the Ministry of Education and Science, as published by the newspaper "Diena" on October 16, 2004

²¹ Report on the Children's Situation in Latvia in 2002. The Secretariat of the Special Task Force Ministry for Children and Family Affairs, 2003. (www.bernutiesibas.lv)

Although the above data does not reflect the age of the students and the school grade, the general increase of numbers testifies to insufficient capacity of education system to ensure access to education for all children. The information on the reasons for truancy is quite unclear. Schools have to indicate in their reports the reasons for truanting, choosing from three options: “arbitrary non-appearance and wandering around”, “parental irresponsibility”, and “social problems of the family”. However these are poor indicators of the reasons for truanting, since the selection criteria are vague and overlapping: for example, there is no clear boundary between “parental irresponsibility” and “social problems of the family”, and they are incomplete (for example, there is no option that the reasons may be related to problems in the education system and not in the family). The impression one gets is that attributing truancy to the above three reasons has more to do with laying blame on the family rather than being an attempt to understand the problem of truanting.

One of the problems that are directly related to non-attendance is **repeated studies in the same grade**. At the end of academic year 2003/2004 the number of such general education students was considerable: 8485²², of which 2175 were students of grades 1 – 4, and 6125 were students of grades 5 – 9. This means that 2.6% primary school children repeat a grade, and in the group of students in grades 5 – 9 the proportion is 3.8%.

The statistics of the Education, Youth and Sports Department of Riga City Council²³, reflecting the number of children repeating the same grade in schools of Riga points to a sharp increase of such students in grades 7 and 8. This situation can be explained by the inability of a number of students to fulfill the requirements of the complicated education programs, which in particular increase during this time. Certainly additional reasons (knowledge gaps, lack of motivation) also may be valid.

Unfortunately there is no data on the impact of repeating the same grade on the dynamics of dropping out: does it facilitate or hinder the process. In the same way, there is no reliable information on the link between repeating the same grade and the level of study motivation. However, despite the lack of such information, the practice of repeating the same year may be treated as a problem in its own right, since in a vast number of cases repeating the same grade does not solve the original education problem. This is confirmed by the fact that 1761 student, which is 20,75% of those who are repeating the same grade, are doing it for a third year (in the same grade).

Students who have mastered the compulsory basic education program only in part, do not receive the certificate when finishing grade 9, but only a report card, which is one more indicator of insufficient education level. At the end of academic year 2003/2004, a whole 3238 students (9.5% of 9th grade leavers) did not receive the certificate. Individuals who have not completed compulsory basic education do not have the opportunity to acquire secondary education, they have only limited opportunities in vocational education (there is a small number of vocational schools that offer basic education studies alongside with vocational training). This means that a portion of this group repeat the same grade at school, and a part of them simply drop out from the system of formal education.

Analyzing statistical data within the context of insufficient education, it is necessary to note the number of children ex-matriculated from schools. A part of these children thus drop out from the education system. During the academic year 2003/2004 a total of 10 242 students

²² Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Education institutions In Latvia at the beginning of the school year 2004/2005, Riga, p 50

²³ Reference to the materials of December 3, 2004 conference of Riga City Council Department of Education, Young People and Sports “The Work of Specialists of Institutions of Education with Pupils who Encounter Problems in Mastering the Program of Basic Education”

were ex-matriculated from regular schools, and 7331 (72%) were basic school students²⁴. These numbers reach the Ministry of Education when schools submit their data. The school providing such a report groups the causes for ex-matriculation according to a number of categories: transferred to another school, expelled upon leaving the age of 18, has been abroad for more than a year, expelled for breaking the code of conduct, and other causes (for example, the child is placed in a psychiatric institution, etc.). As mentioned before, the ex-matriculation does not mean that the student does not continue studies in another school, another country or a closed-type establishment. However, since the information on further schooling of these students is not available, a more extensive analysis of this information is not possible.

More precise causes for ex-matriculation are available for vocational schools²⁵. In the study year 2003/2004 the number of students involved in acquiring basic education alongside with vocational training was 1421, of which 177, or 12 % were expelled. The majority of young people were expelled from year 1 and 2, i.e. in the initial stage of mastering the vocational training. The most wide-spread reason is non-attendance.

Table 4. Students expelled from vocational schools in the study year 2003/2004, which have completed less than 9th grade level education

Index / cause of deregistering	Number
<i>Total number of deregistered</i>	<i>177</i>
Truancy	66
Moved to another school	44
Family circumstances	14
Academic failure	17
Illness	9
Changed place of residence	1
Other causes	26

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Education Institutions in Latvia at the Beginning of the School Year 2004/2005, Riga, 2004, p. 70.

Previous studies on students at risk

Some additional studies on the issues of at risk children in Latvia were carried out recently. These uncover a number of problems in providing education and in related spheres. While statistical data provides information on the scope of the problem of insufficient education, the above studies are focusing on analysis of measures addressing the problem.

The studies identify significant national level problems, such as incomplete register of children, lack of resources, and lack of information.

The accessibility and equality in the education system in Latvia has been analyzed by OECD experts²⁶, pointing out that one of the problems is the lack of a reliable and coordinated register of schooling age children. Because of the lack of such register, there is no clarity as to the number of children who are within the age of compulsory education but who do not attend school.

Findings about street children in Latvia²⁷ provide additional information on deficiencies in the support system for children at social risk, emphasizing the lack of resources for addressing

²⁴ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Education institutions In Latvia at the beginning of the school year 2004/2005, Riga, p. 51.

²⁵ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Education institutions In Latvia at the beginning of the school year 2004/2005, Riga, p. 70.

²⁶ Analysis of National Education Policies. Report of OECD experts, Source: www.OECD.org

²⁷ Inga Lukašinska. Ielas bērni Latvijā: problēmas un risinājumi. Rīga, Nordik, 2002. pp. 40 -41.

the needs of these children and pointing to insufficient analysis of risk factors that impact the children's welfare.

Assessments of local government work identify the following serious deficiencies: unequal distribution of funding, the lack of strategies, insufficient capacity of specialists, lack of information and cooperation.

The contribution of local governments to education varies. The most affluent local governments assign sizable additional funding to education, while other local governments are unable to fulfill the minimum standard requirements for maintaining their schools²⁸. This assessment means that the work with dropouts and those on the verge of dropping out is quite limited, since it requires additional resources (developing and implementing specific programs, in-service training of teachers, salaries for social pedagogues, etc.)

Local governments do not have strategies for addressing problems of children who are at social risk²⁹ and the lack sufficient numbers of qualified professionals to undertake consultative and coordinating work with children, young people and their families. Thus the capacity of urban and rural local government to provide services is quite limited. Alongside with that cooperation among specialists and institutions providing support to children and families is poorly developed. Services are for the most part isolated and poorly coordinated³⁰.

One more problem is emphasized by education specialists, admitting that both local governments and schools have not developed sufficiently the work with various at risk groups. Specialists note that cooperation occurs much more often in the cases when the problems are already grave, and not to foresee possible risks for children and families in advance and to deal with these.

Most education specialists also point out the insufficient knowledge in assessing the needs of vulnerable/at risk children, and providing the needed support based on that, the lack of information on where to turn for assistance when handling complicated problem situation involving at risk children³¹.

Project on School Drop-outs³².

Latvia was taking part in the international study on School Dropouts that was coordinated by the Education Support Program, OSI Budapest. The findings of the study were presented in the National report under title "Factors that hinder timely completion of basic education" and presented to the representatives of Ministry of Education and Science, local governments, school boards, and wider public.

The above study has been carried out by the Centre for Public Policy "Providus". The goal of the study was to identify factors or a combination of factors that influence the risk of not

English: http://www.politika.lv/polit_real/files/lv/ielas_berni_eng.pdf [Street Children in Latvia: Problems and Solutions]

²⁸ Analysis of National Education Policies. Report of OECD experts, www.SourceOECD.org

²⁹ Inga Lukašinska. Ielas bērni Latvijā: problēmas un risinājumi. Rīga, Nordik, 2002. pp. 40 -41.

English: http://www.politika.lv/polit_real/files/lv/ielas_berni_eng.pdf [Street Children in Latvia: Problems and Solutions]

³⁰ Strategies for the Work to be Carried out in Latvia with Children and Adolescents who are Addicted to Psychoactive Substances. Material of the joint project by Latvia and the Danish Government, www.lm.gov.lv/doc_upl/Strategija.doc

³¹ S. Lazdiņa, A Zavačis, Mazaizsargāto grupu bērnu iespējas saņemt palīdzību un atbalstu Valmierā, mazinot apreibinošo vielu lietošanas risku. Situācijas analīze. Izglītošanās centrs ģimenei un skolai, 2004. [The Possibilities for Children from Vulnerable Groups to Receive Assistance and Support in Valmiera, Reducing the Risk of Using Intoxicating Substances. Analysis of the Situation]

³² Indra Dedze, Maiga Krūzmētra, Ingrīda Mikiško "Savlaicīgu pamatizglītības apguvi traucējošo faktoru kopums. SPC „Providus, Rīga, 2004 http://www.politika.lv/polit_real/files/lv/atbirusie.pdf [Factors that hinder timely completion of basic education]

completing basic education. The findings of the research project can serve as the basis for initiating changes on various levels of the education system.

In these project 287 teenagers, 130 parents and 160 teachers have been surveyed. They come from 14 secondary schools, 1 gymnasium, 4 evening schools, 13 basic schools and 1 boarding institution, which allows to make assessment of the situation in various types of education establishments. In the course of the survey, 97 full units of results (student, teacher, parent opinions, thus forming three perspectives on a situation) were gathered. The full units include a student questionnaire, and the teacher's and parent's opinions of the same student, which may add to and deepen the perspective on the problem under study.

While the above mentioned previous studies touch upon dropping out from the formal education system only indirectly, the study 'Factors that hinder timely completion of basic education' is centered on exactly the drop-outs and the causes of the phenomenon.

The study reveals both the external factors (influence of the school, family and peers on the study process), and internal factors (self-assessment of one's competence, motivation to learn, etc.) that are related to the students' dropping out from the formal education system.

The information gathered characterizes both the dropouts and those on the verge of dropping out and their families, as well as conditions that influence dropping out from the formal education system.

The surveyed pupils almost equally represent complete families (45.6%), and divorced families (41.3%). In 12.8% of the cases one or even both the parents had died, and then the pupils were living at the boarding school or were in custody of grandparents or other relatives.

Differences can be observed amongst the families in the cities and in the rural areas. In rural areas there proportion of complete families and the number of those pupils whose one or both parents have died is larger.

Table 5. Characteristics of the surveyed families, % of the number of surveyed families

	Parents live together	Parents have divorced	One or both parents have died
Cities	38.6	50.9	10.5
Rural areas	52.5	32.2	15.3

Most the surveyed pupils (90%) come from families where one or even both parents are employed. However, judging by the financial status of the families, they have to be characterized as needy or even poor, since the majority of the parents (both fathers and mothers) work in low-paid professions, for example, ironer, chamber maid, sweepers, worker at a saw-mill, stoker, etc

The majority of the parents have comprehensive secondary or vocational secondary education, i.e., the level of education is sufficiently high to understand the significance of education in life and to offer at least minimum help to a teenager in learning, if difficulties arise.

The study affirmed that the parents of dropouts and those on the verge of dropping out have no close links with school, which is manifested in infrequent contacts between children's parents and teachers.

According to the information provided by the teachers only 17% of the parents have regular contacts with the school, and 54% of the parents had had only occasional contacts with the school, which apparently had been insufficient.

Parents of boys have been twice as active in meeting the teachers, however, it would be advisable that all parents would visit school more frequently and would take an interest in solving their children's learning problems.

Table 6. Pupil's gender and the parents' contacts with school, (percentage of the surveyed pupils)

Gender	Do the pupils' parents meet with the teachers?		
	Regularly	Occasionally	Never
Girls	14.1	74.6	11.3
Boys	28.3	57.2	14.5

It could be concluded that a weak link between parents and the school points to a broader problem of miscommunication between parents and the school. In any case, the study uncovers the school-parent cooperation as insufficient that is a considerable problem. Successful cooperation may serve as a resource in addressing everyday problems of students, including issues related to getting education.

The majority of the surveyed pupils were academically failing in some of the following subjects: algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, English, Latvian, history and geography. Some pupils had unsatisfactory marks also in such subjects as health education, visual art, household, sports, but their number was very small number. The fact that there was a particular list of subjects in which students failed suggests that the problem is caused not only by the pupils' attitude towards learning these subjects, but also the programs, text-books and teaching methods used in these subjects.

At the same time pupils have unrealistic dreams about their future. They were asked about their future profession and it was possible to divide their carrier aspirations into two categories – jobs requiring vocational education, and jobs requiring higher education (see Table 7). Most of the listed jobs would require the following basic skills – precision, technical knowledge, patience. The students would also need basic knowledge in math, chemistry and physics in order to acquire these jobs. It appeared that students do not have a clear picture about what is needed for the job they are dreaming for. For example, a pupil, who has unsatisfactory grades in eight subjects would like to become a programmer, but a student who does not attend the school from 1998 told that he can be successful in virtually any subject; he just wants to relax for a while and to become a designer some day. Many students would like to become sailors, sportsmen, and to work abroad. It is possible that those unrealistic aspirations are triggered by mass media or movies, as in many of them are showed the opportunities to get easy money, or to become a millionaire without a proper education.

Table 7. Student carrier aspirations

Vocational education needed	Higher education needed
Electrician	Programmer
Painter	Musician
Miller	Economist
Cook	Actor
Assembler	Designer -programmer
Carpenter	Businessmen
Construction worker	Attorney
Auto mechanics	Engineer
Mechanics	Manager
Confectioner	Sports teacher
Driver	Animal doctor
Waiter	Doctor
Bartender	Social psychologist
Locksmith	Architect
Cosmetologist	Notaries

Hairdresser	Translator
Shop assistant	Accountant
Guard	Modeler
Fireman	Entrepreneur
Sailor	Policemen

Pupils who have problems in learning are not too much involved in general school activities. Both the teachers and the pupils themselves assess that only 15% have participated in the activities of special interest groups at their school. Only 21% of the pupils of the surveyed group have fun together with their school mates. Although this kind of behavior is not caused by conflicts in their relationships with their peers, since 62% of the surveyed indicate that they usually were on good terms with their school –mates.

Some of the pupils have taken paid employment. Overall only 8% of students are permanently involved in paid jobs, and about 30% of them take on paid jobs occasionally. However, those pupils who are on the verge of dropping out most likely do not work or work occasionally, while drop-outs alike are more likely to be involved in paid regular or irregular employment.

Table 8. Involvement in paid employment, (percentage of the specific school)

	Taken up paid employment			
	Regularly	Occasionally	Do not work	No answer
No longer attends	15.4	43.6	37.2	3.8
Attends school	3.4	19.1	61.3	16.2

Involvement in paid employment is caused by the financial conditions of the family, but also the wish of the pupils themselves to obtain additional means.

Although the attempts of dropouts and those on the verge of dropping out to get integrated in the labour market and start earning money are to be viewed as positive signs, not getting basic education and vocational training considerable limits the opportunities of these children in the labour market.

Taking a look at the social –territorial cross-section issue, it is clear that education has the highest prestige among the pupils of the capital, the lowest – amongst the pupils of the rural schools. It corresponds to the real situation, because in the capital the greatest demand is for educated and qualified labour force, but there is not yet full awareness of this necessity in the rural areas. One out of four rural pupils either does not see the role of education or has not tried to define it, but almost 20% of pupils have no opinion on this issue.

Table 9. Education as a guarantee for the future, (percentage of the pupils, social –territorial cross –section)

Social-territorial division	Education ensures better future			
	Yes	Perhaps	Don't know	No answer
Urban schools	76.7	16.7	5.0	1.6
Rural schools	50.4	24.0	19.0	6.6
Capital city (Riga)	90.2	7.3	2.5	0

Upon viewing the perspectives of students, teachers and parents on the causes of dropping out there might be identified both similarities and differences in the perspectives of the respondents. The opinions of students and their parents on the causes of dropping out are quite close, while teachers often have a differing view. For instance, “family circumstances” as the cause of dropping out are singled out by 7.5% students, 7.5% parents and 39.7%

teachers. Health problems are named by 10.1% students, 13.2% parents and only 5.3% teachers. The lack of study motivation is mentioned by 29.6% students, 30.2% parents and only 18.3% teachers. Opposite views are manifested in assessing the impact of prior knowledge base, where teachers (24.4%) are much more critical than parents (11.3%) and students (6.3%).

Table 10. The rating of the causes of dropping out as seen by respondents (3 of top responses provided)

Place	Pupils	Parents	Teachers
I place	Lack of motivation – 29.6%	Lack of motivation – 30.2%	Family conditions – 39.7%
II place	Friends, social environment – 15.1%	Health problems, pregnancy, disability – 13.2%	Poor abilities, “gaps” in knowledge, psychological problems – 24.4%
III place	Health problems – 10.1%	Poor abilities, “gaps” in knowledge, psychological problems – 11.3%	Lack of motivation – 18.3%

The most often selected responses by students, teachers and parents point to the controversial attitudes to the causes of dropping out. Students and their parents attribute dropping out or its risk mostly to the lack of motivation to study, while teachers consider the key factor family conditions. Thus quite opposite opinions exist on the issue of what perpetuates the existence of the group of students for whom acquiring official and timely education is at risk. Such divergent perspectives on the causes of dropping out all the more attest to the necessity of bringing the issue to the forefront of debate, involving the general public in discussing the causes and solutions of the problem. A special place must be given to the perspectives of education specialists and parents, since only through joint efforts of the school and parents it is possible to help the drop-out or the student at risk of dropping out.

6. Summary of Findings

National level education policy and practice

The legislation of the Republic of Latvia and other politically significant documents are modern, they clearly define the problems and goals of the education system, however, these are not fully implemented on a practical level.

Population groups, whose access to education is limited, do not receive sufficient support from the state; the responsibility for their involvement in education rests with local governments, where available resources and priorities differ greatly across the country.

The reform of education content requires the movement towards skill development and the mastering of knowledge which will be useful in one’s life; however curricula of various study subjects are still very complicated and not always linked with direct applicability, thus children with less ability and motivation find them quite difficult.

The data gathering on the schooling age children is incomplete – there are discrepancies between the data of the Register of Population and the register of schooling-age children, which is conducted by schools and local governments as the requirement of the Ministry of Education and Science. It is not clear how many children do not participate in the education process, and what the reasons of this condition are.

The criteria developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, which should be identifying the reasons of non-attendance of school, are unclear and open to various interpretation, thus the information is of no practical use.

No studies are carried out in Latvia to obtain qualitative information, for example, on the reasons of lack of learning motivation, as well as the impact of staying in the same grade for a second and a third year on the process of completing basic education. Thus it is difficult to assess the extent to which the practical work is in concert with the policy goals.

Pedagogical and social adjustment work has been started with children who have learning and behavior challenges, however this is not accessible to all children who might need it, and the outcome of the work have not been researched to a satisfactory extent.

Local level education policy and practice

The contribution of local level government to ensuring the education process depends on the funding and human resources that are at its disposal. In particular in the eastern part of Latvia (Latgale), as well as in rural areas, local governments are not affluent and less funding goes to education. For the most part, only city governments can staff their schools with social teachers, who provide assistance in working with social problems of families, truancy, etc.

Because of the restricted resources, as well as the lack of sufficiently educated professionals, local governments do not develop strategies and action programs which are oriented towards identifying the needs of vulnerable groups, responding to these needs and systematic work with families, who need support in bringing up the children.

The information exchange among institutions and professionals is quite limited; therefore the roles of various players in addressing the problems of children and families are unclear.

The work of schools

School teachers admit their insufficient skills in working with children who have learning and behaviors challenges, as well as insufficient work with the families of these children. However the schools lack resources to make progress in this situation.

In some schools the cooperation between specialists and teachers is promoted, and team work in providing support to children is encouraged; however state-wide school teachers lack time and experience, knowledge and skills to organize, manage and carry out this kind of work. Teachers lack the knowledge on where help and support can be obtained when facing complicated and novel problem situations.

Participation of the society

There are several successful examples of the participation of parents' groups and NGOs in addressing problems that are topical for schools: promoting learning, family and school cooperation; however the participation of the society as a resource in improving the work of schools is underused across the territory of Latvia.

7. Recommendations

For national level policy makers and the Ministry of Education

1. Develop a common register of children specifying the kinds of information and the ways it should be obtained/gathered.
2. Improve the monitoring and data gathering systems at schools, developing criteria on various phenomena which would not be susceptible to various interpretations (e.g. on changing schools, on truancy).
3. Study the cause of various phenomena and their impact on the process of basic education: repeating the same grade, decrease of learning motivation, the course of

adjustment work, the process of mastering the subject curricula in cases where the ability of students is insufficient. Based on the results, develop recommendations for improving work.

4. Define precisely the groups that need special support and assistance to facilitate receiving education, and develop concrete practical programs for use at schools and within local government territories, providing funding/co-funding in the state budget.
5. Develop and with the state support implement in-service training programs for school administrations and teachers to assist them in improving work with truants, students repeating the grade and other children at risk within education institutions.

For local governments

6. Identify, gather and disseminate information on the roles and opportunities for cooperation of various institutions and professionals in facilitating the education process, thus promoting coordinated action in addressing the problems of children and families.
7. Develop services necessary for supporting dropouts and those on the verge, as well as their families, based on needs assessments and identification of the best course of action.
8. Support in-service training for teachers, facilitating the improvement of knowledge and skills in working with students on the verge of dropping out and their families.

For schools:

9. Develop teamwork, involving specialists both from within the school and from external institutions.
10. Seek opportunities to improve cooperation with families, emphasizing the development of parenting knowledge and skills, as well as providing support..
11. Collaborate with other schools, exchanging experience and identifying best practices.

For the society:

12. Popularize the involvement of NGOs and informal groups in addressing issues that are topical for schools, gathering and disseminating the existing successful practices and their role in the education process.

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