

# RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

## EAST EUROPE

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### SCHOOL ORGANIZATION PROBLEMS IN CONNECTION WITH THE "DEMOGRAPHIC LOW"

Summary: For the last few years, the annual number of children who reach the age at which they are required to attend school has been gradually diminishing. Within a few years, this falling off in attendance will reach the Secondary Schools. This "demographic low" and its consequences for the school system are becoming a matter of concern not only to the teachers but also to the community at large, because in addition to its effect on the present structure of the school system, it will also have multiple repercussions in the social and economic life of the country.

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Even a cursory examination of the basic demographic indices characterizing Poland's population gives a picture of a society whose age structure is indeed varied. The incomparably heavy losses suffered by the country during World War II and through migration, the postwar increase in the birth rate (stimulated by the state's "population policy"), and the demographic stabilization that resulted from relative economic stabilization and changes in the laws (to permit abortions) -- are the main factors which have influenced the age structure of Poland's population during the period between 1939 and 1970. It suffices to say that during the last 20 years the number of live births per 1,000 of population has diminished by half.(1)

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(1) Rocznik Statystyczny, 1969.

These great changes in the population structure have had a number of serious repercussions, the most acutely felt of which are those that affect the organization and endowment of the school system. In the first postwar years (until 1954), the number of children of primary school age was rather low (about three million). Beginning in 1955-1956, there was an influx into primary schools of children born after the war. The total number of children of primary school age swelled to over five million.<sup>(2)</sup> From 1963 on, however, the number of children reaching their seventh year began to diminish, and the "demographic high" became the No.1 problem for the secondary, and later for the higher, rather than the primary schools.

The inevitable concomitant of the rapid increase in the number of pupils was the necessity to expand educational facilities, by increasing both investments and the number of teachers. Toward the end of 1958, the authorities initiated country-wide construction of 1,000 schools, to be financed out of funds provided by the community each school was to serve. These funds were raised by imposing additional taxes on income, which were deducted from wages and salaries of nearly all those employed in both the socialized and private sectors of the economy, and in agriculture. The funds obtained over the years by this means were intended only to supplement funds laid out by the state, which during the same period financed the construction of 4,000 schools. Despite this greatly increased investment, however, demand outran supply and the older age groups in the "demographic high" received their education under conditions which were far from perfect.

The first signs of "easing up" became noticeable in the middle 1960s, but, beginning in 1969, the drop in the number of school pupils became so marked that a reorganization -- first of all in the primary schools -- became absolutely necessary. The network of primary schools, which had been expanded in order to cope with the "demographic high," is now, in many areas, unwarranted, in view of the diminishing number of school-age children. This applies particularly to rural areas, where -- in the most extreme cases -- there are no more than three or four candidates for the first grade. All in all, it is expected that in the current year the number of children attending primary schools will diminish by over 100,000. This trend has been apparent for some years, and as far as the lowest grades are concerned is part of a pattern which has been apparent for some

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(2) Tygodnik Demokratyczny, 3 May 1970.

time. In the case of urban schools, the diminishing influx of pupils to the lowest grades will make it possible to improve teaching conditions and, above all, to do away with shifts. In the case of rural schools, "doomed" to serve specific small communities which in principle are unaffected by fluctuations of population, the diminishing of the number of candidates for the lowest grades not only does not improve conditions, but often puts the advisability of maintaining such schools in doubt. This applies particularly to small schools which teach the first four grades, and whose location stemmed mainly from the necessity to provide schools within a radius of three or four kilometers from the children's homes.

In August of this year, the authorities took the first measures to adjust the school network to the present number of pupils. The crux of this move is regrouping of the teaching staff, which -- without making the distance to school any greater for the youngest children -- would nevertheless allow a certain reduction in the number of schools offering a full curriculum of studies. The reorganization has followed two seemingly opposite directions: in some schools the authorities have left only a single teacher and discontinued the upper grades, but in most schools that offer a full curriculum, the teaching staff has been increased; this has had the effect of turning these institutions into so-called "assembling" schools, which accept pupils from neighboring schools in which the higher grades have been discontinued.

As a result of this reform, the number of one-teacher schools has increased by about 40, and 127 schools which formerly had two teachers each have been closed. In their place the authorities have created 357 schools with staffs of at least three, but most often four, five, or six teachers. These figures illustrate the changes in the structure of primary schools with regard to the size of the teaching staff, but they do not show the changes in the number of schools. In relation to the over-all number of primary schools (about 26,000), these changes are not great, but it should be taken into consideration that they apply mainly to rural schools, and, moreover, not to all regions of the country. In the Opole Voivodship, for example, the number of children of school-starting age is still showing a tendency to increase.

In addition to necessitating the transfer of teaching personnel, leaving one teacher in schools which formerly had two or more and creating the "assembling" schools with larger



teaching staffs has increased the commuting distance to school at least for the pupils in the fourth to eighth grades (the number of schools with four or more teachers has increased roughly in proportion to the number of schools in which the last four grades have been discontinued). The situation is aggravated, however, by the bad state of the roads and the lack of transportation, and boarding schools.

Against the background of the above, an interesting proposal put forth by Jerzy Urban in Polityka(3) is worthy of attention. He suggested that "the available funds -- which will no longer be used to provide as rapid an increase in the number of schools as in past years -- should be used to construct boarding schools and for the granting of housing allowances," etc. The author's idea was to mitigate the existing discrimination against rural youth in the secondary schools (mainly owing to the lack of boarding schools and children's lodgings). At present, for instance, over 85 per cent of the young people in Warsaw are attending post-primary schools, while in the otherwise highly civilized Poznan Voivodship attendance is only 29 per cent. Urban also proposed that the number of general education schools should be increased at the expense of vocational schools. To complete the picture, the following table from the "Demographic Prognosis for the Years 1969-2000," prepared by the Planning Commission attached to the Ministers' Council, is of considerable interest:

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(3) 14 November 1970.

Children and young people in the primary and secondary school age groups, in the years 1969 - 2000		
Year :	Number of children and young people between the the ages of :	
	7 - 14	15 - 18
	(In thousands)	
1969	5,260	2,762
1975	4,251	2,889
1980	4,128	2,157
1985	4,509	2,009
1990	4,725	2,214
1995	4,303	2,378
2000	3,737	2,289

Antoni Marek  
(Polish Unit)