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Educational Policy in a Medium-Sized Town – Dilemmas and Directions of Changes

Polityka oświatowa w średnim mieście – dylematy i kierunki zmian

Abstract: The Education System Act specifies the governing bodies responsible for ensuring safe, hygienic conditions for care, education, and learning. Local government has many responsibilities, and one of the most important from a societal perspective is education. The aim of this research is to describe and analyze the role of municipal education policy in the perception of educational institutions amidst current changes and emerging educational dilemmas. This article is a case study of the functioning and performance of the local education system in a medium-sized city on the border of cultural and ethnic differences. The research findings indicate that the main problems affecting the Racibórz local government include: demographic decline, limited funding from the central government, and high social expectations. The demographic decline necessitates the creation of a new network of educational institutions. Domestic funding is supported externally through competitions, grants, and EU projects, among other sources. The analysis highlighted the role of municipal government in addressing local educational issues and its role in ensuring the quality of education in the city.

Keywords: medium-sized city; local education policy; school; student

Abstrakt: Ustawa o systemie oświaty określa organy odpowiedzialne za zapewnienie bezpiecznych i higienicznych warunków opieki, edukacji i nauki. Samorząd terytorialny ma wiele obowiązków, a jednym z najważniejszych z perspektywy społecznej jest edukacja. Celem niniejszego badania jest opisanie i analiza roli samorządowej polityki oświatowej w postrzeganiu placówek oświatowych w kontekście zachodzących zmian i pojawiających się dylematów edukacyjnych. Artykuł stanowi studium przypadku funkcjonowania lokalnego systemu oświaty w mieście średniej wielkości, na pograniczu różnic kulturowych i etnicznych. Wyniki badań wskazują, że głównymi problemami, z którymi boryka się samorząd Raciborza, są: niż demograficzny, ograniczone finansowanie ze strony rządu centralnego oraz wysokie oczekiwania społeczne. Niż demograficzny wymusza konieczność stworzenia nowej sieci placówek oświatowych. Finansowanie krajowe jest wspierane zewnętrznie, między innymi poprzez konkursy, granty i projekty unijne. Analiza podkreśliła rolę samorządu w rozwiązywaniu lokalnych problemów edukacyjnych oraz w zapewnianiu jakości edukacji w mieście.

Słowa kluczowe: miasto średniej wielkości; lokalna polityka oświatowa; szkoła; uczeń

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INTRODUCTION

Municipal educational policy sits at the core of organisational culture of school work. It is a key element to understanding the role played by municipal administration in the structuring the educational environment and the organisational culture of schools operating in its area. Municipal policy carried out by municipal administration entities is not only a tool in the realization of curricula, but it is also a foundation upon which lays everyday activity of educational institutions, including schools.

In the context of socio-economic development, growing expectations of the quality of education, and the necessity to adapt to the challenges of 21st century, the role of municipal educational policy is becoming increasingly important. It is the local governments that decide what conditions will the schools have to execute their visions and missions, how well supported will the pedagogical innovations be, and furthermore what values and norms will be shared in school environment.

The school work culture, understood as a set of values, norms, customs, and practices shaped by the organisational environment, is intricately linked to the municipality's educational policy. It is the municipal educational policy that influences the motivation of principals, teachers, interpersonal relations, the level of involvement of the school community and, finally, the quality of the educational services provided. Supporting the development of the teaching staff's competencies, the promotion of innovative solutions or investments, renovations, modernisations, and the school network are just a few aspects that result from the municipality's educational policy and have a direct impact on the work culture in schools.

The analysis of the role of municipal educational policy as the foundation of a school's working culture only allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms by which educational institutions, including schools, function at the local level. It is the educational policy that sets the direction of activities aimed at improving the quality of education, the satisfaction of pedagogical or non-pedagogical staff. It is the positive image of the school environment in the local community.

> Based on a number of qualitative and quantitative studies, the authors of the McKinsey & Company report concluded that an education system that is at a good level should be characterised by, among other features:
>
> a) The optimal number of schools and teachers.
> b) Decentralisation of financial and administrative powers to the deans of the institutions and the open allocation of education funds.
> c) Disclosure of performance data (made available to the public).
> d) Defined (and viable) educational pathways that take into account young people's potential and interests.
> e) Organised content-based supervision to assist schools in building programmes on selected subjects, equal educational opportunities for girls and boys. (Piotrowski, 2012, p. 180)

However, referring to the case study of Racibórz, it can be stated that

> the City of Racibórz performs its basic tasks in the field of education, among others, by:
> - creating and running kindergartens, including those with integrated sections and special kindergartens, primary schools, including those with integrated sections;
> - creating a network, including the limits of its perimeter, of public kindergartens and primary schools;
> - supervision of the implementation of compulsory education, including keeping records of children and young people;
> - financial measures – opportunities and effects;
> - equalisation of educational opportunities;
> - educational staff;
> - educational management;
> - educational base and equipment. (Nowacka, 2023, p. 9)

The Municipality of Racibórz strives for the quality of education, focusing on this task, in particular emphasises:

- the optimal number of schools and teachers;
- decentralisation of financial and administrative powers;
- disclosed allocation of education funds;
- transparency of performance data made available to the public;
- defined educational pathways that take into account the potential and interests of young people (Nowacka, 2023, p. 11).

Educational policy is one of the most important tasks of local government, affecting directly or indirectly, everyone in the local environment. Conducting educational policy is one of the most important tasks performed by local government units. Expenditure on education is often the most significant item in the local authority's budget, while the decisions taken affect the future fate of the entire local community and every resident. The Education System Act imposes an obligation on the head of the local authority, mayor, president, starost and marshal to provide annual information on the state of implementation of educational tasks, leaving them free to choose both the content and the form of this information, as well as the way it is used (Szumilas, 2011, p. 7).

The local government, guided by the needs and financial possibilities as well as by the provisions of the educational law, establishes rules for the operation of educational institutions including schools.

> Educational models and standards are established for kindergartens and for schools at all educational stages, which are as follows [...] Primary schools. The school model:
> - the school has at least 80 pupils;
> - a class has up to 27 pupils;

- is a single-shift school;
- has a separate block for classes I–III;
- is supplied with a gymnasium, room for corrective gymnastics, sports field equipped with appropriate equipment to meet safety requirements;
- classrooms equipped with multimedia and audiovisual equipment, with Internet access;
- day care centres with separate space for themed corners, equipped with play equipment and educational toys and games;
- a library with a reading room with Internet access;
- school playgrounds equipped with recreational and sports equipment;
- hot meal facilities;
- is a facility accessible to people with disabilities;
- organisation of care in the school day care centre adapted to the needs of parents.

Educational standards for primary schools:

- recognition and development of children's talents;
- inclusive education for children with special educational needs;
- psychological and pedagogical assistance (speech therapist, psychologist, pedagogue, therapist);
- extra-curricular activities developing pupils' passions and interests;
- career guidance and vocational orientation classes;
- classes supporting the physical development of the child;
- didactic and remedial classes;
- pro-ecological and pro-health education;
- implementation of educational programmes and projects;
- compulsory swimming lessons for classes I–III;
- educational programmes in day care centres aimed at children's personal development, including special programmes for younger children. (Nowacka, 2023, p. 13, 14)

Good communication between local authorities and their units is the basis for good and effective cooperation, and makes it possible to implement often difficult but necessary projects or tasks.

> The dialogue between local government units and the schools they run is one of the elements of the decentralisation of Polish education. Of course, the leading authorities have a decisive influence on the school head, every year in May they are obliged to approve (after prior analysis) the school organisation sheet, and every year in December they determine the school's financial plan for the next budget year, i.e. they take the most important decisions on the functioning of educational institutions. However, the experience of decentralisation, as well as numerous research studies (including those based on international PISA surveys), show that the best sites are those with a strong principal, who have autonomy and are able to use it creatively. (Herczyński, 2011, p. 16, 17)

The principal is an administrative but also a leadership function.

> The school principal is a key figure in any school system. He or she is the one who evaluates and motivates teachers, is the first and most important element of pedagogical supervision, admits teachers to work by selecting them independently from among willing candidates, visits lessons and evaluates the practical skills of his or her teachers, and has a great influence on their careers. For this reason, the professional pedagogical preparation and methodological competence of principals have a direct impact on the level of teaching, on the relationship between teachers and students, on the cooperation between the school and the parents of students, and thus on the results of education. (Herczyński & Sobotka, 2012, p. 242, 243)

One of the most important administrative bodies of a school is the principal.

> The legislator has clearly defined the functions to be performed by the school principal in their role. It is worth recalling them at this point. However, this will be a cursory overview and focus on the most prominent issues. According to the current legislation, the principal must be viewed as:
> - the head of a municipal organisational unit;
> - the head of the workplace;
> - the pedagogical supervision authority to subordinate teachers;
> - the chairperson of the pedagogical council;
> - the public administrative body.
>
> Each of these functions comes with a wide array of duties, authority, and competences as defined by law. (Kubiczek, 2016, p. 21)

The municipal education policy of the city of Racibórz was specified for the years 2017–2022. It was incredibly detailed and precise, indicating many guidelines for its institutions including schools. The following years of education did not receive municipal guidelines, rather they were based on previous outlines and recommendations. Issues and tasks were identifies and solved on an ongoing basis.

PRIMARY SCHOOL AND NURSERY UNITS OF RACIBÓRZ

As to not eliminate nurseries with a small number of children, and minimise costs and still save these types of nurseries mainly in smaller areas, a restructuring is conducted to unionise primary schools with nurseries, which is how primary school and nursery units were created. They are becoming increasingly popular. This solution allows for optimalisation of space, staff, and it satisfies environmental expectations.

Table 1. Number of students, school year 2024/2025

Number of students			
No.	Primary School and Nursery Unit	Primary school	Nursery
1	Zespół Szkolno-Przedszkolny nr 1	189	96
2	Zespół Szkolno-Przedszkolny nr 2	177	98
3	Zespół Szkolno-Przedszkolny nr 3	117	67
4	Zespół Szkolno-Przedszkolny nr 4	138	73
Total		621	334

Source: Department of Education of the city of Racibórz.

Primary schools operating in the community have rich history and traditions. Often also an image developed over the years. For example Szkoła Podstawowa nr 1 (Primary School No. 1) has integration class, Primary School No. 15 has a class with a specialisation in sports, athletics and swimming, Primary School No. 18 has classes with specialisation in general sports and volleyball-basketball, and in Primary School No. 13 dominates wrestling. This way, an individual character of each school allows it to have a more attractive teaching-sports offer and the possibility of attracting students.

Table 2. Primary schools of Racibórz, school year 2024/2025

No.	School	Number of students
1	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 1 z Oddziałami Integracyjnymi im. Powstańców Śląskich	489
2	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 3 im. Krzysztofa Kamila Baczyńskiego	214
3	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 4 im. ks. Stefana Pieczki	360
4	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 13 im. Stanisława Staszica	447
5	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 15 z Oddziałami Sportowymi im. Jana III Sobieskiego	667
6	Szkoła Podstawowa nr 18 im. Książąt Raciborskich	588
Total		2,765

Source: Department of Education of the city of Racibórz.

The number of full-time teaching positions almost matches the number of teachers, indicating that there is no shortage of teaching staff. Teachers do not have too much overtime, which allows them to prepare well for teaching activities and to perform educational or caring duties.

Table 3. Employment in educational institutions, school year 2024/2025

School year	Full-time positions	Number of teachers
2024/2025	649,46	636

Source: Department of Education of the city of Racibórz.

The teachers eagerly apply for a promotion. Many of them are chartered teachers, and so the staff has the highest qualifications, but also is mature and experienced.

Table 4. Number of teachers according to the stage in career advancement in education institutions (S – trainee teacher, K – contracted teacher, M – appointed teacher, D – chartered teacher), school year 2024/2025

Type of institution, position	Nurseries				Primary schools				Total			
	S	K	M	D	S	K	M	D	S	K	M	D
2022/2023	5	26	38	66	24	71	66	334	29	97	104	400
2023/2024	4	28	42	65	22	73	73	324	26	101	115	389

Source: Department of Education of the city of Racibórz.

Nowadays many pupils need specialised support. In schools apart from the teachers, support can be provided by, for example, a pedagogue, a psychologist, a therapist, a speech therapist. The students often have medical certificates or diagnoses from a psychologists, which makes the schools responsible for introducing them onto a specialized educational path. To equalize the chances of all students in the municipal education policy of the city of Racibórz for the period 2017–2022 in the legislation was written:

> The equalisation of chances is possible if adequate activities are taking place, which are planned to be implemented or continued. Those are, e.g.:
> - The development and mastering of the existing system of financial support for the students who are most in need (nourishment, providing necessary supplements and clothing, rest).
> - Closer cooperation of schools and nurseries with Social Welfare Centres and other institutions supporting families – the diagnosis of child's needs and coordination of activities for the family in need.
> - Introduction of complex prevention programs in schools after the diagnosis of its problems, additionally initiating on its premises preventative measures resulting from the analysis and examination of problems arising in students.
> - Creation of a "database" of teachers qualified in specialized work with children and youth in need of specialized learning needs, distinct types of child educational specialists. (Educational policy of the city of Racibórz for the period 2017–2022)

The socioeconomic situation allows for the creation of public educational institutions as well as private ones. Thus, with time, the number of private educational institutions rises, which fulfils the needs of the local environment. It fills the gap in the educational offer for students and their parents, who expect a specialized vision for the educational institutions.

Table 5. Recruitment for primary schools (SP – primary school, ZSP – primary school and nursery unit)

No.	Institution	Number of children in 2024/2025	Number of institutions in 2024/2025	Recruitment in 2025	Number of children in 2025/2026	Number of institutions in 2025/2026
1	SP 1	489	23	59	496	3
2	SP 3	214	11	27	219	2
3	SP 4	360	17	42	363	2
4	SP 13	447	21	31	425	2
5	SP 15	667	29	87	661	4
6	SP 18	588	26	72	586	3
7	ZSP 1	189	9	33	202	2
8	ZSP 2	177	10	31	199	2
9	ZSP 3	117	8	14	115	1
10	ZSP 4	138	8	24	147	1
Total		3,386	162	420	3413	22

Source: Department of Education of the city of Racibórz.

The number of students keeps getting smaller, which causes the network of educational institutions to be in danger and supposedly in the future it will be necessary to consider a more rational network of institutions, perhaps also including schools. This issue does not only regard the student, to which institution will they be assigned, but also regards the question of work for the teachers and other pedagogical, administrative, and economic staff. It is a complex, societal problem (Wywiad…, 2025).

The educational institutions of Racibórz have the qualifications of a public institution, albeit also a private institution. The Chairperson of the Department of Education of UM Racibórz lists the private educational institutions:

Private institutions:

- Katolicka Niepubliczna Szkoła Podstawowa
- Społeczna Szkoła Podstawowa

Private creches:

- Żłobek "Elfik"
- Żłobek "Iskierka"

Daycares ran by private persons:

- CREATIVA Julia Parzonka
- "Dziupla"
- "Maluszkowo"

Private nurseries:

- Niepubliczne przedszkole "Kubusia Puchatka"
- Przedszkole "Stokrotka" z Oddziałami Integracyjnymi i Specjalnymi
- Raciborskie Centrum Opieki nad dziećmi
- Domowe Przedszkole
- Terapeutyczny Punkt Przedszkolny "GUCIO"
- Terapeutyczny Punkt Przedszkolny " GUCIO i MAJA"
- Przedszkole Terapeutyczne "Słoneczna Kraina"

The management, which in accordance with its policy plans investments, but the needs of course are numerous. It prioritizes the necessary ones. Apart from the investments, planned are renovations on as-needed basis and small modernizations.

In the school year 2024/2025 planned investments in the education include the following:

- building of a pitch in Primary School and Nursery Unit no 2;
- building of a pitch in Primary School No. 3;
- building of a nursery in Markowice;
- supplying nurseries' playgrounds with equipment;
- laser tag playground in Primary School No. 15;
- building of municipal nursery and renovation of a nursery in Racibórz;
- green laboratories in SP 4, ZSP 2, SP18, SP 1, SP 13;
- outdoor eco-laboratory in Primary School and Nursery Unit No. 1, Primary School and Nursery Unit No. 4;
- modernization of Primary School No. 1's premises (Wywiad…, 2025).

To maintain a high standard of education, considering the limited own financial capital, often outside funding is required, mainly from the European Union. Below are examples of projects funded from the European Union in the municipality of Racibórz in the school year 2024/2025:

- enhancing the Quality of Inclusive Education in the City of Racibórz – value: PLN 3,300,649.83 – project under implementation;
- the Future Begins in Racibórz Schools – value: PLN 3,757,732.55 – project under negotiation;
- strengthening the Quality of Preschool Education in the City of Racibórz – value: PLN 4,715,354.20 – project under implementation;
- modernisation of the football pitch located on the premises of Primary School No. 18 in Racibórz – value: PLN 1,120,515; co-financing: PLN 500,000 – project under implementation;
- improvement of sports infrastructure at Primary School No. 15 with Sports Units in Racibórz – value: PLN 1,246,105; co-financing: PLN 623,051 – project under evaluation;
- construction of a covered sports field at the school and preschool complex – co-financing: PLN 2,505,000 – project under implementation;

- construction of a permanent ice rink facility with social and locker room infrastructure in Racibórz at Zamkowa Street – value: PLN 12,630,760; co-financing: PLN 5,000,000 – project under implementation (Wywiad…, 2025).

Private institutions, aspiring to compete with public ones, encourage novel teaching methods. One of these innovations is the Maria Montessori method. This way they expand the local educational offer and give students and their parents the ability to choose the right institution for their child. The Montessori method prioritises independence, the freedom of choice and learning through experience.

The city of Racibórz in its educational policy prioritized the student:

> […] the care for quality development of education in the city. This concerns the individual progression of each school and educational institution, as well as in general. In accordance with the created vision of the educational environment, all nurseries and schools shall be:
> - inclusive to all children and youth,
> - of a high quality standard of education, care, and upbringing,
> - functioning in good condition, with modern equipment,
> - creating an informed society,
> - effectively managed. (Nowacka, 2023, p. 10)

CONCLUSIONS

The key role of the meaning of constant adaptation of the educational policy in municipality should be highlighted. The lack of continuous planning and reaction to the changing socio-demographic changes can lead to ineffective functioning of the educational system. Spontaneous decision-making, instead of strategical planning can negatively affect the stability and development of educational institutions.

The role of the director is crucial, the director should be a leader and a pioneer in innovation, not only an effective administrator. In their competences lay the representative function outside of the school, creating its reputation and promoting innovative projects or local initiatives, which considerably influences the quality and additionally the societal image of the school.

A considerably difficult challenge for the managements is the downfall of the number of students stemming from demographic decline, thus arises the necessity of creating an adequate and well-organised network of educational institutions. It is worth noting that the education is an incredibly sensitive societal area, and its funding mainly belongs to local governments, which must actively create the educational policy, whilst not taking into account the rules of the free market.

A positive aspect of the municipality of Racibórz is the role that outside projects play in financing local government educational activities. Those projects not only allow to react to local needs, but also support the strengthening of societal bonds and

community initiatives. Additionally, outside financing also allows for broadening of the educational offer, especially through developing soft skill activities and investing in sports facilities, though it is costly and needs maintenance.

The diversity of problems of small and medium local governmental institutions compared to large agglomerations should also be remarked. Additionally, it should be highlighted that the education environment is still underfunded. A large part of it lays in the hands of local governments, which have varying results, depending on their own budget. In the context of societal expectations municipalities are under pressure to provide modern schools, which will prepare its students to start their adult life well. School in this context is not only the beneficiary, but also the partner of the local government, especially in those unfortunate times of underfunded budgets and demographic decline.

The analysis revealed that the main challenge facing education is the decline in student numbers, which stems from demographic decline, directly impacting the rising costs of maintaining institutions. Social expectations necessitate continuous investment in local government infrastructure. The data obtained confirmed that effective education management in the city requires a combination of social sensitivity, local government acumen, and economic factors. It is crucial that actions are focused on the long-term development of institutions and methods, as well as (re)interpretation of educational policy in the context of local conditions and global changes.

The importance of a planned, flexible approach to managing local education in an unstable world of risk, but also the local stability of the lives of children, youth, and parents in the city, should be emphasized.

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