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Austria's school governance in an international comparison

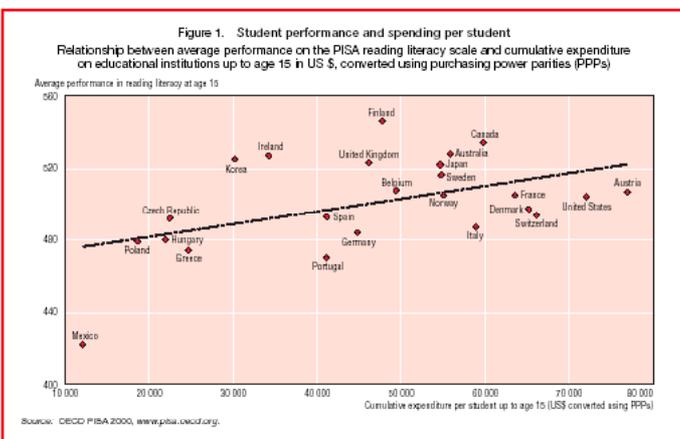
Compared to other countries, Austria boasts a federal, bureaucratic, heavily regulated, hierarchic, and input-controlled model of school governance. In successful PISA-countries (such as Finland, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Great Britain et al.), extensive reforms were started already years ago which replaced the traditional bureaucratic administration of the school system with new, decentralized forms of school governance. These countries all display a high degree of decision making competence and responsibility in terms of staff, financing, and the curriculum – either on the individual school level (“school autonomy”), or on the level of local authorities. Devolution of competence was in these countries accompanied by an implementation of new systems of evaluation.

All OECD countries that achieved better results in the PISA study than Austria did, spend significantly less money on education, but their students still perform well. Against this background, we have to find out whether there is room for optimizing the Austrian school governance system, and also if there is innovative potential in it.

Results from an international comparison¹

Austria is one of the countries with the highest per capita spending in the sector of compulsory education. Yet, quite contrary to this, PISA has shown that the average school output in the sense of student performance is merely average in an international comparison.

Figure 1: Spending in the sector of education and school success

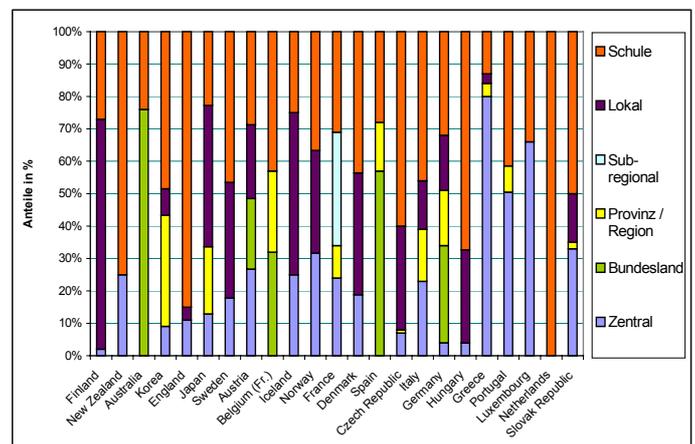


Austria invests slightly less than 80,000 USD in each child's schooling. Still, students in a number of other countries achieve better results in the PISA study. Spending in the winner country Finland, for example, is below 50,000 USD per child. Thus, high financial expen-

ditures not always guarantee for good school performance. One possible way to explain these differences in efficiency between the school systems lies in the different design of controlling mechanisms in the field of schooling, especially in how headmasters and authorities on various levels share competences.

In an international comparison, Austria is among those countries where many players are part of the decision making (similar to the situation in Japan, Germany, France, and Italy). School governance structures in the top performing countries, however, display much 'slimmer' systems (compare figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of the structures of decision making in compulsory schooling. An international comparison (Ranking according to the PISA 2000 results²)



Source: Education at a glance, OECD 2004

School autonomy looks quite different in the respective countries as regards its degree and fields of decision (the competences of the schools regarding curriculum design, organisation of schooling, recruiting and discharging teachers, further training for teachers, financial leeway, etc).

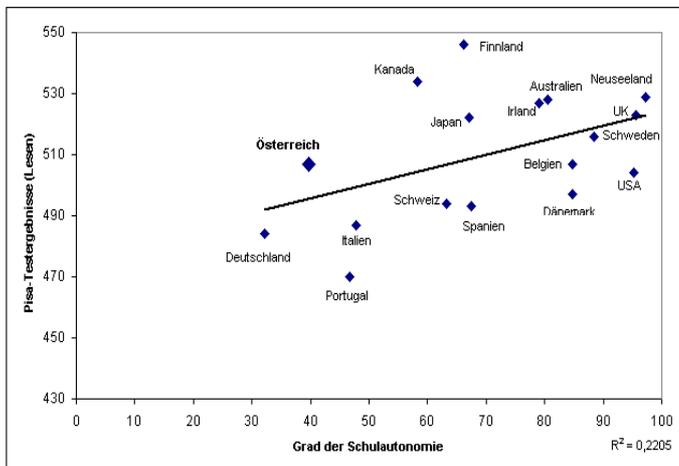
Austria has a comparatively bureaucratic, heavily regulated, hierarchic school governance model which is input-controlled and also characterised by federal elements. The top nations in PISA, however, have put into practice a much higher degree of school autonomy.

The central point of the *ibw*'s assumption is that school systems which are geared to elements of New Public Management (devolution of competence from the authorities down to the school: school autonomy, performance standards), produce better student performance than school systems with bureaucratic structures.

Figures 3 and 4 clearly show that the education systems of the PISA top performers have put into practice a much higher degree of school autonomy and subsidiarity (i.e., decisions that are made on a regional, local, or school level), than it is the case in Austria. With an autonomy percentage³ of less than 40 per cent of the decision making actually taking place in the schools (or slightly more than 50 per cent, if one adds the regional and local levels⁴), Austria is clearly below the (school) autonomy degree of the winner country Finland and other nations which boast outstanding PISA results.

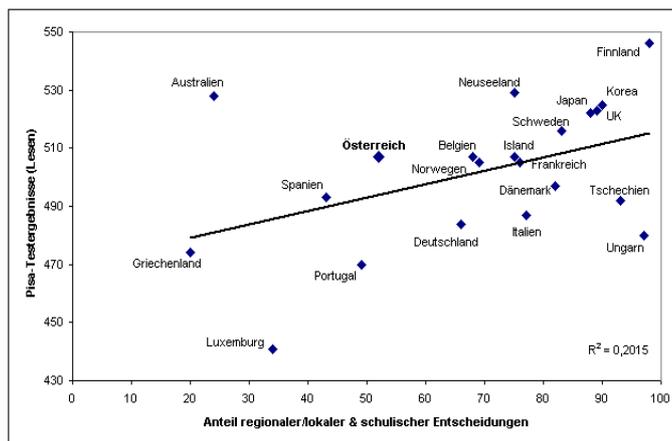
But the two figures also show that a high degree of autonomy at schools and on a local level does not necessarily guarantee for good PISA test results (cf., for example, the USA and Denmark). Autonomy as such does therefore not lead to successful schooling on its own. It is obvious, however, that there is not a single country displaying low autonomy levels that is among the top performers.

Figure 3: Student performance and school autonomy



Source: OECD PISA 2000

Figure 4: Student performance and subsidiarity (degree of decisions made on a regional/local level or at schools)



Source: OECD 2004, OECD PISA 2000

The analyses carried out by the *ibw* showed that the devolution of competences has to be seen as only one – however important- element in the general setting of an education system. Yet, it is always integrated into and interlinked with other elements of the system: how the means and forms of decision authority (curriculum, financial as well as staff autonomy) are precisely designed, given targets (curricula, educational standards), and the transparency of the degree to which the aims are reached (standardised assessments of educational standards). Such a system can be regarded as being a quality assurance control loop that is intended to lead to better school results. Hereby, the feedback system is of special importance, i.e., how the results of the evaluations are made available to the respective schools as an informational base, and which liberties schools actually have to react to the former. Therefore, the school's administration is one of the lynchpins.

The international comparison produced further fundamental results:

The fundamental structures of the school governance models differ significantly from each other in the respective countries. Basically, one can distinguish three basic structures:

- “Bureaucracy” model (Austria and Germany, for example)
- Local Empowerment model (such as in Finland and in Sweden)
- School Empowerment model (to be found in the UK and the Netherlands)

To each of the above three base models there can be grouped countries which are among the top performers of the PISA study. Yet it is eye-catching that these countries have fewer levels of decision making than we in Austria do. Either, the local level plays an important role (combined with school autonomy which roughly corre-

sponds to the one we have in Austria), or the central level (government, province) is an important decision maker – together with clear and extensively developed school autonomy.

From the international comparison one can thus draw the conclusion that different configurations may lead to outstanding productivity of the education system and that searching for the one and only configuration would be the wrong way. This means that there is reformation potential or that there are first signs of reforms in the Austrian system.

Comparing with the top performers of the PISA study

The following education systems and governance regimes of the following countries were analysed in detail for the *ibw*'s study as a benchmark for the Austrian system. All the below countries were rated higher than Austria in the study:

- Finland (especially because of its unsurpassed results in the PISA study),
- Canada (as a federal nation with a regional focus of interest),
- New Zealand (thanks to radical devolution of competences in favour of the individual schools),
- the Netherlands (due to their tradition of autonomy and innovation in the field of schooling), and
- the United Kingdom (mainly thanks to its innovation strategies as a reaction to comparative studies).

In the countries compared, transfer of operational controlling competences to the schools (or to the local level) is always connected to the establishment of structures that control the output, i.e., the authorities set performance targets and standards which are then subjected to external and independent quality controls; moreover, schools are obliged to account for their undertakings. Thus, devolution and output control are to be understood as being complementary elements of efficient school governance; they both complement and condition each other.

If we compare the individual countries in light of competence distribution in **class and tuition organisation as well as compilation of the curriculum**, we find out that except for Canada, all of them have as a decisional level centrally managed authorities or agencies (in Canada, these competences are given to the provinces). Regional authorities are not involved in development and decision making as regards the curriculum – again this does not apply to Canada.

Still, the countries vary significantly as to how much the national curricula frameworks go into detail, and how much elbow room they leave. In Austria and Canada, most of the curriculum framework is mandatory; schools have only little possibility to weigh the contents themselves. In contrast to this, schools in New Zealand and the Netherlands have to fill the curriculum framework according to the local needs. Finland and England hold a position in the middle: on the one hand, the curriculum framework in these countries does not display as detailed a regularisation as Austria- on the other hand, it is mainly the local authorities who are in charge of designing it in detail, together with the schools.

As far as class organisation is concerned, all countries display a high degree of school autonomy. The decisions that cannot be made autonomously, are made within a framework that is given by a higher-ranking authority.

Comparing the **financial competences** in the Austrian school system with the other five countries given, one finds that all countries save Finland have considerably more budget to handle freely than we in Austria do. This freedom is connected to accountability.

Public schools in Austria do not have decisional competence in **staff** matters. They depend on good cooperation with the authorities in charge. Other countries either transferred these issues to the respective schools (New Zealand, the Netherlands, Canada), or to the local level directly above (Finland, England) which employs teaching staff in cooperation with the school administration.

While we do have general **educational standards** in Austria, detailed standards that allow for an output control are only now being prepared for testing. All the countries compared, by contrast, have implemented output standards (the centralised nationwide school leaving exams in the Netherlands are de facto standardised performance tests), which are regularly checked in the form of nationwide tests. As regards the way of testing and how the results of individual schools are published, the countries compared differ: while in England, New Zealand, and the Netherlands the reports are published, the schools alone get them in Finland. In Canada, both forms can be found, depending on the province concerned.

Each of the countries compared boasts a central institution that is in charge of surveying student performance in the schools.

The Austrian way – no nationwide, central school leaving exams, no standardised nationwide testing, and merely sporadic inspection which mostly happens if there are reasons for it – cannot be found in any other country compared.

Most of the countries have set up **school inspection offices** as a second centralised means of control (in Canada, the ministry of education is in charge of this). Unlike in Austria, these inspections take place regularly - and not only if there are certain cases to deal with. Moreover, there can be seen a shift in the role of the inspection offices; in addition to the 'typical' agenda of school inspection, they are assuming advisory function for the schools. This tendency is especially pronounced in Finland and New Zealand; in these countries, the inspection offices resemble external school development advice centres rather than a controlling authority. Quite differently, they concentrate on the controlling function in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands.

More and more, the countries count on **self-evaluation of schools**, or they urge them to carry out an evaluation and have an external evaluation done if necessary.

All countries display a clear will to improve professionalism of head teachers and teaching staff alike; this is a sign of **quality management**. Usually regional institutions advise teachers or offer further training classes.

The differences lie in the design of in-school quality assurance: in Finland, for example, in-school evaluation is compulsory; in New Zealand, the Board of Trustees composes an annual school report for each school every year which serves as a basis for a new curriculum and improvements; Canada stands for active cooperation; in Austria, in-school evaluation and development can be seen as still being rather informal. The program labelled Quality in Schools (Q.I.S.) is an important starting point – yet, it is not mandatory for schools.

This research brief merely outlined a few highlights of the study. The study itself contains, among other details, more in-depth descriptions of system elements and instruments of governance structures in the countries compared.

Schmid Kurt and Pirolt Richard: "Austria's school governance in an international comparison" – Education and Economy No. 32, 2004.

Download: <http://www.ibw.at/html/buw/BW32.pdf>

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¹ All data concerning student performance relies on the PISA 2000 evaluation and refers to reading competence.

² In PISA 2000, the Netherlands did not achieve the necessary participation levels (85%), and this is why the data is not sure to be representative. Therefore, the results for the Netherlands are usually not presented in international evaluations; in this figure, they were placed on the right side.

³ The autonomy percentage is an index value from the data gained in the course of PISA 2000. Head teachers were asked about their influence on substantial decision making in financial matters, as regards staff, and the curriculum.

⁴ The results of the degree of decision making taking place on a local, regional, or school level, are based on answers of national expert committees. These were interviewed with an extensive catalogue of questions by the OECD in the year 2003. These questions included certain aspects of how school is organised, personnel matters, questions of planning and structure, as well as allocation of funds and how they are used.

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