



Mitigating the effects of a pandemic on pupils' education must be a (higher) priority

After more than a year since the first confirmed case of a new coronavirus in Slovakia and months of strict anti-pandemic measures, in April 2021 children began to gradually return to schools. Slovakia was one of the countries with the longest (fully or partially) closed schools in the EU, with many pupils not participating in distance/online education.¹ **The SAO SR considers mitigating the effects of the pandemic on the education of pupils to be a key challenge, and therefore welcomes the efforts and planned activities of the Ministry, but at the same time identifies space for increasing their scope and targeting.** Efforts and resources spent for this purpose may be reimbursed many times over in the future.^{2,3,4}

According to analysts from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 52,000 (7.5%) primary and secondary school pupils were not involved in distance education during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and almost 128,000 (18.5%) pupils did not learn via the Internet. **The situation was critical especially in schools with a high proportion of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB) and in special primary schools, where the share of uninvolved children and children who did not learn via the Internet was several times higher than the average of other schools.**⁵ A representative survey by the Center for Educational Analysis (CVA) and the Comenius Institute on the course and impact of distance learning in the 2020/2021 school year showed that 10% of pupils were almost never involved in distance learning and the same proportion were educated exclusively offline.⁶

As one of the measures to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the education and upbringing of pupils, the Ministry launched the Together Wiser development project in March this year. The declared goal of the project was to support primary schools and special primary schools, which were to create conditions for improving the knowledge and skills of pupils at risk of school failure / with insufficient distance education through quality and affordable tutoring during the months of April to June. The Ministry has set aside a total of EUR 1,480,000 for this purpose.

As the ministry does not have data on the involvement of pupils in distance education at the level of individual schools, our analysis focuses on pupils from SDB as those with a higher probability of not participating in (online) distance education and at risk of school failure.

Supported schools represent 20% of the total number of 2,306 primary and special primary schools and are attended by 12,625 pupils from SDB (38% of their total number). **Of the schools with a high proportion of pupils from SDB (more than 30%⁷), 36% were involved in the project** (Figure 1).

Using data on the planned numbers of tutored pupils at the level of individual schools, **we estimate the maximum number of tutored pupils from SDB at the level of 9,850 pupils, which would represent**

¹ Only two countries in the EU had fully or partially closed schools longer than Slovakia (comparison). [\[online\]](#)

² How much will children lose in future income due to closed schools? [\[online\]](#)

³ Do Differences in Schools' Instruction Time Explain International Achievement Gaps? Evidence from Developed and Developing Countries. [\[online\]](#)

⁴ Do better schools lead to more growth? Cognitive skills, economic outcomes, and causation. [\[online\]](#)

⁵ The main findings of the questionnaire survey in primary and secondary schools on the course of distance learning in the school year 2019/2020. [\[online\]](#)

⁶ Report from a representative survey on the course and impact of distance learning in the school year 2020/2021. [\[online\]](#)

⁷ The share of pupils from SDB at the level of 30% represents approximately the 4th quartile (33.18%) of the share of pupils from SDB within schools with pupils from SDB.

30% of their total number (Figure 2). The project would cover this number of disadvantaged pupils only if the supported schools tutored the maximum number of their disadvantaged pupils, which would mean that the tutored pupils would change completely every month. If the pupils were changed as little as possible, there would be 5,734 tutored pupils from SDB (17% of their total number). The exact number of pupils from SDB covered by tutoring cannot be calculated. The Ministry did not collect data on the planned numbers of tutored pupils belonging to this category, nor on the number of unique pupils who will take part in tutoring (it only has data on the planned numbers of tutored pupils in individual months). Moreover, even if the maximum number of disadvantaged pupils were tutored, it would be tutoring for one month, which from the point of its effectiveness appears to be insufficient.⁸

Figure 1: Involvement of primary schools and special primary schools with pupils from SDB in the project Together Wiser

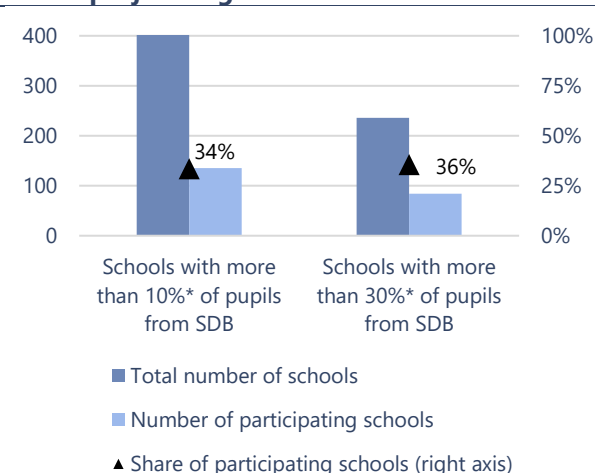
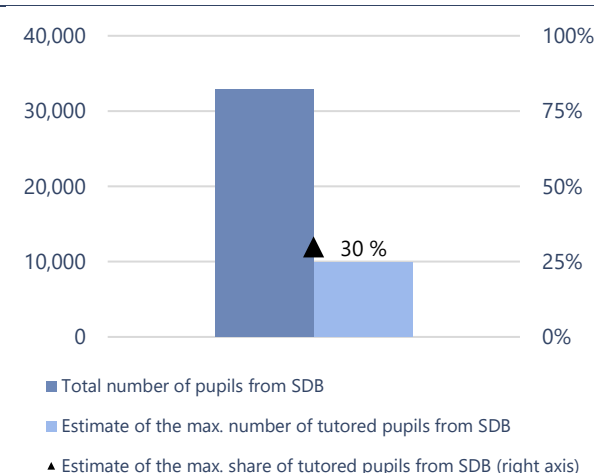


Figure 2: Coverage of pupils from SDB by tutoring within the project Together Wiser



Source: Author's elaboration

* The share of pupils from SDB at the level of 10% is approximately the median (8.39%) share of pupils from SDB within schools with pupils from SDB.

** The share of pupils from SDB at the level of 30% represents approximately the 4th quartile (33.18%) of the share of pupils from SDB within schools with pupils from SDB.

Source: Author's elaboration

Note: We assume that the tutored pupils have completely changed in each month.

Another measure to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on pupils' education is financial support for primary schools in organizing summer schools. The Ministry has allocated approximately 3 times higher funds for this year's summer schools in primary schools than in 2020 (EUR 375,800 in 2020 versus EUR 1,114,000 in 2021). The CVA estimated that last year at least 92% of children who did not learn online during distance learning did not go to summer schools. Analysts also calculated that a summer school for 20% of offline pupils would cost about 7 to 12 times last year's amount depending on its duration, and for 100% of offline pupils 37 to 62 times last year's amount.⁹ In addition, the tutoring of primary school pupils by university students took place as a joint initiative of the National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic (ŠPÚ) and universities. Despite its undoubted suitability, the program has managed to cover only 1,132 pupils since its launch in October 2020.¹⁰

These findings raise questions whether the Ministry's actions aimed at mitigating the negative impact of a pandemic on pupils' education are adequate and sufficient, especially for those pupils who have been particularly affected by anti-pandemic measures in the form of closed schools.

⁸ In any case, tutoring for three months also appears to be insufficient (Not enough children will be involved in tutoring. [\[online\]](#))

⁹ Summer schools as a measure to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational outcomes of pupils. [\[online\]](#)

¹⁰ This is a data as of 31 May 2021 and was provided by the ŠPÚ.