

Modern Russian Reforms in Education:
Challenges for the Future

Tatyana Tsyrkina-Spady
Seattle Pacific University

Introduction

This paper should not be considered a result of serious research of the Russian official documents in the sphere of education and the current situation in it. It is rather an analytical account of what has been happening in the field and what kind of challenges can be expected.

Since the fall of 2010, Russian education has looked like as a serious battlefield with a number of Ministers and Ministry officials replaced, with complicated and intriguing plots worthy of an Agatha Christy detective novel. But the history of these dramatic metamorphoses goes back to 1992 when a new federal education law was issued, revised in 1996, amended many times later, and finally perceived as a restraint to meet modern educational needs. As should happen in any democratic society, a new law was drafted and published on the website of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science for an open discussion.

The expectations for public involvement in analyzing the document overwhelmed its creators. During a very short period of time this draft was so bitterly criticized by so many different people that it has become a subject of ‘federal investigation’ and received personal attention from top federal officials, including President and Prime Minister. Nevertheless, after a few years of hot public debates, 600,000 individual and 40,000 group comments, the State Duma finally adopted a new federal law in December 2012.

Another important and controversial document that caused an even more aggressive and bitter reaction of the public, schoolteachers, and other professionals was State Education Standards, SES (Kezina, Kondakov, 2011). With very few positive comments, primarily from the creators of the Standards themselves, the rest of the respondents felt that if the Standards were implemented, then there would come generations of unsophisticated young people, strong enough to defend their homeland but unable to critically analyze the reality.

Reforms in Education After Perestroika

Let us start with a brief description of some political events that happened during the last few decades in Russia and seriously affected its education system. In August 1991, certain political forces in the country made an attempt of a coup with the goal to

overthrow Gorbachev and restore a socialist regime. As is well known, this attempt failed, and at the end of the same year the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Russia became an independent country and hastily tried to change everything, which had the label “Soviet” or “Socialist/ Communist.” The next year, 1992, was marked with issuing a new federal law “*On Education*” and a number of innovations which came along: private (non-state) schools, including religious educational institutions, new textbooks, school financial autonomy, to name just a few (Dashchinskaya, 1997).

In general, the system of public education in the country was supposed to be rebuilt on the basis of the following principles: decentralization, de-ideologization, democratization, diversification, humanization, and “humanitization” (increasing the amount of humanitarian subjects in the school curriculum). One of the goals was also to completely change and rewrite most “ideological” school textbooks, especially in history and literature. At the same time the economic situation in the country became desperate, and for many Russians the problem was more of how to survive, then how to promote an educational reform. Seeing various obstacles along the way, the Government issued many new regulations and amendments in 1996 and later, though they did not produce any radical change. More so, a national public survey conducted in December 1996 showed that 83% of all respondents characterized the situation in Russian education as a crisis or a catastrophe (Independent Gazette, 1997).

In 1998, the Government came up with the idea of composing a *National Doctrine of Education in the Russian Federation up to 2025*; an ad hoc committee was formed, and as a result, the Doctrine was ready and published in 2000. The main intentions were to stabilize the socioeconomic and spiritual basis of Russia; strengthen democracy; prepare professionals for the new market economy; promote Russia’s image as a great and powerful nation with success in education, culture, arts, science, and information technologies in the world. The Doctrine called for developing Russian patriots and citizens of a civic society. To realize these ambitious goals the Government planned to financially support schoolteachers, raise their salaries together with... the society’s respect and appreciation of their work, which has never been fully successful. The Doctrine also introduced some radical innovations such as a transition to a 12-grades’ secondary school that remained just an intent as well.

Another important document (2002) with the attractive title *A Concept of Modernizing Russian Education until 2010* was aimed to provide each student with a comprehensive quality education while preserving its fundamental level and its compatibility with individual needs of citizens and the society. The Concept called for maintaining stability of the educational system that in turn, would guarantee every child and young adult equal access to quality education at every stage. The document clearly stated the deficiency of the federal funds and suggested that other funding sources should be brought into this field, simultaneously raising the status of every education provider and maintaining the development of education as an open federal-public entity. After September 2003, when Minister of Education V. Filippov signed the Bologna Declaration, Russia was supposed to become an active promoter of the unified European educational space. Again, a lot of good intentions...

To enact the ideas of the Bologna process, in the early 2000s, national standardized testing was introduced in Russian schools – first, as a pilot project in some selected regions and cities, and then, starting from 2009, as mandatory Unified State Exams. Also in 2009, a survey from the All-Russian Central Institute of Public Opinion showed that almost half of Russian citizens were not satisfied with school education in the country, and 37% considered the situation alarming (Shatunov, 2011).

In 2005, reforms in education were announced within a *Priority National Project “Education”* with the idea to promote modernization and systematic changes in every sphere of Russian education.

In November 2010, The Russian Government adopted a new “*Federal Program of Education Development for 2011-2015*” which was the basis of the presidential program *Our New School* with the goal to develop new standards of general education; school and afterschool programs; information service centers, systems and methods; and finally, electronic forms of information delivery. This Program was meant to modify the role and standards of public education, and refocus it towards developing Russian identity and strengthening such civic values as justice, freedom, interethnic peace, family traditions, individual and public safety and security. The document also called for the consolidation of Russian society on the basis of raising the level of civic responsibilities, mutual understanding and trust on the part of its various social, religious, and ethnic

groups. Education was supposed to help reaching a national consensus while evaluating the main stages of the rise and development of the Russian society and the Russian state.

Though some experts consider that real reforms started only in 2009/2010 when disconnected partial changes finally produced a required synergy and showed the true “face” of the general concept of Russian educational reforms. Among these elements a current Education official Shatunov (2011) names the following:

- Independent quality management.
- Per student funding of schools.
- A new system of calculating salaries for teachers.
- Optimization of schools in the face of a demographic crisis.
- New standards/tests for school graduates and college freshmen.
- Introduction of new education standards (Shatunov, 2011).

Of course, the main reform came with issuing a new law on education (On Education in the Russian Federation, 2012), which to this day causes a number of contradictory and often negative comments, including an open letter to the Russian President signed by a wide-ranging group of educational professionals and representatives of the public.

If to briefly summarize the new aspects of the most recent law on education, they include the following:

- Prioritizing children (ages 6-7) living in the area to be admitted to the first grade of their closest neighborhood school.
- Raising attention to creating and sustaining safe school environment.
- Prohibiting testing of elementary school children when they apply for admission to different specialized schools.
- Requiring testing and other types of contests while applying for enrollment in different art institutions.
- Closing small town or village schools only with the permission of the local community Council.
- Introducing and promoting inclusive education in public schools and a gradual termination of special education institutions.

- Transforming preschool education into a separate level of education and dramatically raising its tuition.
- Closing technical and vocational schools that train professional workers.
- Considering the results of the Unified State Exams at the college/university entrance level only within the first five years after high school graduation.
- Increasing teachers' salaries.
- Reducing numbers and types of prioritized groups considered for college admission (e.g., young adults with special needs, Chernobyl catastrophe victims).

This is just a short list of what Russian education is facing today in terms of the new law with bitter criticisms against the rise of preschool fees which leaves many toddlers and little children at home and their mothers jobless; absence of a real increase in teachers' salaries and a tremendous reduction of the prestige of the teacher's profession together with an expansion of dropouts among both, teachers and other educational workers; an unsatisfactory level of teaching fundamental subjects in a number of secondary schools and a decrease of the overall school education quality; a substantial growth in the amount of paperwork at the college level which distracts college professors and lecturers from their primary duties to teach and do research, to name just a few.

New State Education Standards (SES)

New State Education Standards have been developed by a large group of academics under the supervision of Kondakov, CEO from the most prestigious educational publishing house "Prosvetschenie." According to Kondakov (2010), his team based its work on the best world, Russian and Soviet traditions using a 'systematic and activity' approach as a theoretical foundation for the SES development, applying the concept of a "nucleus and a shell" while selecting the "educational content," and promoting the principle of multiculturalism (Kondakov, 2010).

As a result, an *elementary school graduate* should possess a fundamental ability to learn and have a strong feeling of love towards the homeland; obtain an inquisitive mind and an active knowledge of the world; accept and respect the values of his/her

family and society; be benevolent, responsible for his/her own actions and prepared to work independently; and follow the rules of health and safety for himself/herself and for the surroundings (Kondakov, 2010).

Clearly, state demands towards *high school graduates* (Grade 11) are more challenging and rigorous but still quite consistent in their fundamental ideas where *patriotism* comes first and includes respect towards multinational Russian peoples, their cultures and their spiritual traditions, as well as values of one's family, Russian civil society, and all of humanity. SES also stress the necessity to develop and sustain creativity, positive motivation for innovative activities and critical thinking; being socially active and prepared for cooperation with others, and for a life-long learning (Kezina & Kondakov, 2011, p. 4).

New SES, as was mentioned above, introduced an innovative concept of “a nucleus and a shell” while selecting school subjects and choosing topics and data to study. For example, an ideological nucleus of the General Education Curriculum for Grades 5-9 presupposes the following school subjects: History, Geography, Russian Language, Russian literature, and a Foreign Language which in many ways corresponds with the logic of the previous version.

In contrast, the first draft of the SES recommended that high school students (Grades 10-11) should have only three (!) required school subjects: *Physical Education*, *Russia in the World*, and *Health and Safety*, and fulfill an individual research project. An explanation of such ‘an interesting’ choice came from the former Education Minister Fursenko who compared the subjects, *Physical Education*, and *Health and Safety* with hygienic skills, which every student should acquire and which are critical for one's health. All the other school subjects were united into six subject areas for students to select one from each area and to make the maximum studied subjects no more than 9-10 (see: table 1) as opposed to the current number of 16-20.

Table 1

Russian, Russian Literature. Native Language (other than Russian) and Native Literature	Foreign Language (First; second)	Social Sciences (History, Geography, Economics, Law)
Mathematics and IT (Mathematics, IT, Algebra, Geometry, etc.)	Natural Sciences (Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Ecology)	Elective Courses

One more innovation of these SES is to allow students to choose the level of studying a subject – integrated, basic, or advanced. An integrated level introduces only a minimal amount of knowledge of the subject matter and is oriented more towards students' socialization while a basic level is meant to provide students with some basic facts and concepts within the subject, and only an advanced level prepares students for the future professional education in the chosen field.

Public debates about these standards were intense from the very beginning but they became truly dramatic after an open electronic letter addressed to the Russian President, Prime Minister, Head of the State Duma, and Minister of Education and Science was published on the Internet (An Open Letter, 2011). The letter was prepared and signed by Sergey Volkov, Moscow Literature teacher and journal editor, and twelve other teachers and academics, and served as a wake-up call for the top Russian authorities. At the same time it was warmly received by tens of thousands of teachers, university faculty, and the wider public who supported the idea of preserving traditionally required subjects – Russian, Mathematics, Literature, and History in Grades 10-11. The authors of the letter hold the view that any society, which cares about its future, should teach these subjects to its younger generation. Volkov and others consider the official cancellation of teaching Russian literature in high school grades unprecedented and state that,

Without studying literature (especially at the high school level) it is impossible to develop a personality that the Standards (SES) are talking about... Without deep literature and aesthetic education we will achieve neither better morals or developed tolerance, nor deliberate attitude towards one's country (patriotism), and we will never be able to raise national competitive abilities on the whole (An Open Letter, 2011).

At the end of the letter its authors express their demand to stop abusing school programs and prevent turning current mandatory school subjects into electives, especially those subjects that have a high level of importance in developing Russian citizens, and in this way predicting the future of the country.

Victor Sadovnichy (2011), Head of the Russian Rectors' (Provosts') Council and Moscow State University Provost, agrees with the authors of this letter and expresses a number of critical comments coming from the Council. Together with many other top university administrators he believes that secondary schools should provide a solid foundation for college education, and this foundation can be built only by studying such school subjects as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Russian language and Literature (Sadovnichy, 2011).

Finally, according to All-Russian survey conducted by Moscow-based All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion in February 2011, only 22% of 1,600 respondents from 46 Russian regions and republics supported the new SES (Most Russians are against new school standard, 2011). The majority of the survey participants considered that Algebra, Russian, Literature, and History should remain required subjects.

As a result, the most recent SES version became less radical and allowed more subjects and more variations for putting them together. In its present form, new SES for high grades will permit to study 9(10) subjects with three as aforementioned and an individual research project plus six required subjects to be selected out of the six subject areas. The implementation process of new SES has been done gradually – since 2011 most elementary grades (1-4) started working in compliance with them; next year middle grades (5-9) switched to new SES, and finally, beginning with the fall of 2013, high grades (10-11) in various regions will proceed to implementing them. A completion of this process is scheduled for 2020, and the results will need more research in the future.

Conclusions

As was shown, Russian education is still in a transition. So without making any serious conclusions, we would just indicate a number of challenges that should be taken into account and analyzed on different levels:

➤ Political:

- Russia remains a highly centralized state – any reforms are still imposed from above.

- Local governments and municipalities can barely make their own decisions.
- Political power is bonding with the Russian Orthodox Church that often contradicts the Constitution of the country.
 - Economic:
 - Education is viewed as an economic endeavor when students and their parents are considered clients who receive certain goods and services.
 - Education is underfunded, and teachers' salaries are still very low.
 - Bribery in education is extremely high; Mark Levin from the Higher School of Economics estimates corruption at about USD1 billion paid each year in bribes only to secure entry and pass exams (Finn, 2008).
 - Cultural:
 - Reforms in education are often oriented towards North American and European models and ignore the Russian cultural context.
 - Successful Russian educational practices are not seriously considered in reforming schools.
 - Inviting foreign faculty and “foreign minds” with a tremendous difference in salaries in comparison with local academics does not help to raise quality of education.
 - Professional:
 - Teaching is not considered prestigious; the numbers of mature and new teachers leaving schools are growing.
 - Evaluation criteria and tests are prepared in Moscow without considering local socioeconomic conditions.
 - Russian academia is facing the challenge of being thoroughly controlled by the state and has been bitterly criticized by the Federal Ministry of Education.

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