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Harmonisation of the school system hits a brick wall

A school starting age of 4, two years of kindergarten and harmonised educational standards – those are the aims of an agreement made by the cantonal directors of education. But now that a third of the cantons have rejected this concordat it cannot come into force throughout Switzerland. By René Lenzin

On 21 May 2006, things were looking rosy for most Swiss politicians in education. On this date, almost 86% of voters and all the cantons backed the new education article in the Federal Constitution. The aim was to introduce a degree of standardisation into Switzerland's different school systems, which vary from canton to canton. The constitutional text seeks to harmonise the school starting age, the length of compulsory schooling, the duration and targets of the various educational stages, the transitions between stages and the recognition given to the schooling a child has completed.

But now it seems that these provisions will be much harder to implement than the resounding 'yes' vote might have suggested. Because the cantons still have authority over school education, the federal government cannot enforce harmonisation. For such a move to go through, the cantons would have to reach an agreement, known as a 'concordat', between themselves. Only if 18 out of the 26 cantons sign up to the concordat can the federal government declare it binding upon all of them. The cantonal directors of education have reached just such an agreement under the name HarmoS, but it would seem that there are not enough cantons prepared to accept it for a standard school system to be introduced throughout Switzerland.

11 years of compulsory schooling for all

The key elements of HarmoS are:

All children must attend school for 11 years: 2 years of kindergarten, 6 years of primary school and 3 years of secondary school. Pupils will complete each stage at a pace appropriate to their personal abilities and level of maturity. Children will start school after their 4th birthday (with a cut-off date of 31 July).

All children will receive basic education in three languages, mathematics, science, humanities, social sciences, music/art and design, physical education and health.

All children will start a first foreign language no later than the third year of primary school and a second foreign language no later than the fifth year of primary school. Each language region will decide whether to give priority to English or another Swiss language. By the end of their compulsory schooling children should have an equal level of competence in both foreign languages.

Kindergarten: a bone of contention

So far, 11 cantons have signed up to the concordat (see map). This at least satisfies the minimum number required for HarmoS to come into force at all. But in seven cantons, either voters or the parliament have rejected the agreement. In Aargau, the population rejected an education reform in a decision that will defer HarmoS for the foreseeable future, while in Obwalden and Appenzell Innerrhoden local governments have shelved the matter for the time being. So 16 cantons at most will be joining the harmonised system over the next few years – too few to push through the key pillars of HarmoS throughout Switzerland.

The most controversial point in the referendum was the two-year compulsory kindergarten and the resulting younger school starting age. 86% of Swiss children already attend kindergarten for two years, but in the cantons that rejected harmonisation the first year is either voluntary or non-existent. Lucerne became the first canton to reject HarmoS in September 2008. A good two years previously, 85% of voters in Lucerne had said 'yes' to the education article in the Federal Constitution, but at that time there was no real fight for votes and little debate on concrete issues – in Lucerne or anywhere else.

Next contentious issue: the curriculum

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has spoken out especially strongly against HarmoS. The party wants to uphold cantonal autonomy and warns that an early school starting age could result in excessive state control over education and upbringing. These arguments hit home in central and eastern Switzerland in particular, not least because the proponents of HarmoS did not get quite so involved in the debate.

Buoyed by its success over HarmoS, the SVP has already announced its next target in the field of education: the standard curriculum for all German-speaking cantons and the concordat for special needs education. These projects are not directly associated with HarmoS, but there is some overlap. For example, the curriculum specifies how the educational standards defined in HarmoS are to be achieved. This is another area where the SVP wants to preserve cantonal autonomy.

In the long term, however, the party will be powerless to avert a certain amount of harmonisation because of the constitutional article mentioned earlier. The article prescribes that if the cantons cannot reach agreement, the federal government must intervene: "If the co-ordination process does not result in a harmonisation of the school system (...), the federal government shall enact the necessary provisions."

