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most and have to think about the content of what they read.”

Is the reading crisis a language crisis?

Rösler believes that there needs to be more done at home within the family to develop the reading skills of children from a young age, given that a quarter of Swiss PISA students scored very poorly on reading. Young people from immigrant backgrounds account for a very large proportion of these bad results. Students from families in which the test language is normally spoken at home performed notably better.

So is the reading crisis essentially a language crisis? “If you start school without speaking the language, it is almost impossible to catch up,” says Rösler. “Switzerland is not doing enough when it comes to early language teaching.” But there are exceptions: the canton of Basel-Stadt leads the way in early language support. Basel’s cantonal authorities require families to fill in a questionnaire about their children’s command of German before they go to nursery school. Children who need extra help receive mandatory tuition free of charge in the year before entry. From summer, the city of Chur will also be offering mandatory language tuition to children who are still unable to speak enough German 18 months before the start of nursery school. The city of Lucerne is championing a similar scheme, after sending its first batch of Basel-style questionnaires to parents in January. One year ago, however, the education committee of the canton of Zurich rejected a parliamentary initiative to roll out the Basel scheme. According to Rösler, the PISA study ultimately reveals the need for action in one particular area: “We need to step on the gas when it comes to equal opportunity here in Switzerland.”

How Switzerland’s 15-year-olds performed

In 2018, 600,000 students from 79 countries participated in what is now the latest PISA study to have been published. They included 6,000 Swiss students born in 2002. The tests, conducted at 200 Swiss schools, delivered mean scores for Switzerland as a whole. The results of the assessment do not provide for cantonal comparisons or a breakdown of scores by language region. Switzerland’s students performed best in mathematics compared to other countries, while their mean performance in science was significantly above the OECD average. (GUM)

Switzerland in figures

Lots of plastic and loads of money

84

Demand for small, lightweight plastic bags in Swiss supermarkets has fallen by 84 per cent in the space of a year. This is because anyone who wants one must now pay an environmental charge of five centimes.

5,120

Talking of the environment, Swiss cleanliness, and plastic: according to the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology (EMPA), 5,120 metric tons of plastic ends up in the environment each year in Switzerland. Plastic pollution is increasing, because plastics take so long to decompose. The University of Berne estimates that around 53 metric tons of microplastics are to be found in the top five centimetres of the floodplain in Swiss nature reserves.

95,000,000,000

Now let’s talk money. Inherited wealth in Switzerland is at an all-time high, with some 95 billion francs in inheritance payments likely to change hands in 2020 – five times more than in 1990. This annual figure is set to grow in future years. Those inheriting today are also much older than the average heirs of one generation ago. This enormous flow of money remains largely untaxed in Switzerland, where politicians are nevertheless pushing for an increase in inheritance levies.

200

Dog tax, on the other hand, is not to be barked at. It can cost up to 200 francs. Many Swiss municipalities charge double if you own a second dog. Financially speaking, Switzerland is anything but canine heaven. It’s enough to make anyone howl.

551,000

And how many taxable dogs are there in Switzerland? As many as 551,000. Canine density is at its lowest in the canton of Basel-Stadt, where there is one dog per 38.4 inhabitants. The canton of Jura has the highest canine density, with one dog per 7.8 inhabitants.