

Dear Mr
Ing Robert Plaga, Ph.D.
Minister of Education, Youth and Sports
Karmelitská 529/5
118 12 Prague 1

Prague, November 5, 2020

Open letter to the proposal of language training for pupils with insufficient knowledge of the school language

Dear Minister,

We are addressing you in connection with **the proposal of systemic support for language training for pupils with foreign nationality**, which was introduced by Mgr. Svatopluk Pohořelý, head of the basic education department, at the conference NPI ČR (15/10) and META, o.p.s. (22/10). This proposal was eagerly awaited throughout the calendar year, as it is a key measure to ensure equal opportunities in education for **pupils with insufficient knowledge of the school language**. According to expert estimates, there are approximately 18,000 of them in primary schools.

These pupils are significantly **at risk of school failure**, which is repeatedly pointed out by the international PISA tests, especially in the Czech Republic the results of uniform exams and in practice. This was also very clear during the spring crisis in terms of distance learning. Restrictions on in-person learning in connection with a pandemic affect children with a different mother tongue (DMT) in particular. In many cases, teachers are completely neglected because they are unable to communicate with them remotely and at the same time they often have zero support from parents who do not know the language themselves or their language knowledge is very limited. Because of this experience, it is clear that **the education system needs to build real systemic support for the development of the language** of these pupils, which would enable functional support for teachers and ensure equal access for pupils with DMT to education.

Although **we all appreciate more flexible funding, an increase of lessons range and the financial allocation** that the proposal brings, we are afraid that the planned changes completely neglect (smaller) schools that educate only one to three children with foreign nationality and which are in regions outside the city majority. It follows from the proposal **that these children will be taught only in the schools assigned by the region**, where they would have to commute, or **in the form of online group learning organized by the school assigned by the region**. Which, as the only support, is completely insufficient, especially for children from the early primary school, of whom there are 2/3 according to statistics - commuting without parents would be practically impossible and distance learning as the only form of learning Czech as a second language is completely insufficient.

Also, pupils of foreign nationality with insufficient knowledge of Czech, who have been studying at a Czech school for more than 12 months, are completely excluded from the support. They will not be entitled to language training according to § 20, and according to the MEYS at the above conferences or support measures according to § 16. In practice, however, we often meet these students, usually in schools without support, experiencing

repeated school failure and they often have to repeat a year, as a result of which in many cases they do not even receive a full basic education. The lack of support at primary schools is then reflected in the extremely unsatisfactory situation of these pupils during the transition to secondary education.

As the biggest threat, we consider **the proposal about abolishing the right of support measures from §16 of the Education Act for foreign pupils**, which was presented by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports on October 15, 2020 at the NPI CR conference and which also resulted from some statements by Mr Pohořelý at the META conference on October 22 (In the discussion on the role of Education Counselling Centre in the new system, he replied: *Education Counselling Centre will be involved mainly in the case of other special educational needs of the pupil, for the language training, Education Counselling Centre is not necessary to be involved.*) If this happens, the schools in which language training will not take place will remain completely without the tools of support for foreign pupils. These pupils will lose the possibility of support in regular education (modifications of methods, content, assessment, education according to IEP) and will participate in it **completely without understanding**. They will not be able to be supported by a teacher's assistant or a pedagogical intervention, which we consider, in addition to learning Czech, to be an essential tool enabling teachers to truly individualize their teaching. **Therefore, we ask you to guarantee the preservation of support under § 16 of the Education Act for all pupils with a different mother tongue**, regardless of their nationality/citizenship, and regardless of whether they will be supported in the new system under § 20 or not.

Furthermore, the whole proposal is disproportionate and confusing for practice in that **it retains the right to support measures for children with Czech citizenship**, who, on the contrary, will not be entitled to language training unless they are "linked" to foreign pupils at their school. Pupils with Czech citizenship (and a different mother tongue) will therefore be taught Czech as a second language as part of support measures, ie only on the recommendation of Education Counselling Centre, which has too many obstacles in practice. Additionally, they will be entitled to only half the range of learning Czech as a second language compared to pupils with foreign citizenship (200 instead of 400 hours).

The measures described above will have a negative impact on **the success of all pupils with foreign citizenship**, mainly because every attention is paid only to the education of Czech in language training, but neglects **the fundamental support of (academic) language in regular teaching**. This should be provided **in parallel with language training** in the form of content modification, method and evaluation in education from §16 (or ideal modification of §20 only based on language diagnostics provided by the school). A very helpful support measure (SM) is a teacher's assistant or pedagogical intervention (which, according to surveys, are also one recommended SM). Pupils usually attend regular classes. If they are not entitled to SM, **they will participate in lessons completely without understanding**.

Especially, **the proposal will have a negative impact on students who will not be able to participate in language training due to organizational issues** - ie the inability to commute to the school assigned by the region and the lack of support through distance learning.

If the proposed regulation limited the right of pupils to support measures, it would be in conflict with §16 of the Education Act, the amendment of which is completely unacceptable by secondary legislation, and it would lead to legal uncertainty and interpretive lack of clarities and would be subsequently annulled by a court decision.

The proposals are **also in direct conflict with the Strategy of Education Policy until 2020** and with the newly adopted **Strategy of Education Policy in the Czech Republic until 2030+**, as one of the main props of these strategic documents **is the reduction of inequalities in education. However, the proposed changes in the form presented so far will lead to their increase.** The proposal is also in conflict with the resolution of the Government Council for Human Rights of September 1, 2020, by which the Council calls on the Ministry „*to set language training for newcomers so that it is accessible to all pupils with insufficient knowledge of the school language, especially pupils entering primary schools and pupils before the start of secondary school*”.

The presented proposals also show that for pre-school education, the newly created curriculum of Czech as a second language will be part of the FEP PE and thus education will be financed within PHmax, while in the case of primary school the curriculum will not be part of the FEP PE and will be financed from the regional reserve. We believe that funding from PHmax would allow for more flexible and simpler ensuring of teaching and would prevent the above-mentioned shortcomings of the system. At the same time, it could be followed by other necessary changes, for example in the form of uniform tests from Czech as a Second Language.

We, therefore, ask you to adjust the system so that it **ensures equal opportunities** in education for children and pupils with insufficient knowledge of the school language, whether they are foreign or Czech nationality.

We will be happy to assist the Ministry in modifying the proposal.

Sincerely,

PhDr. Kristýna Titěrová, program director, META, o.p.s.

Mgr. Magda Faltová, Chairwoman of the Committee on the Rights of Foreigners, Director of the Association for Integration and Migration

Mgr. Klára Šimáčková Laurenčíková, Chairwoman of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Chairwoman of ČOSIV

Mgr. Andrea Krchová, director of the Consortium of non-governmental organizations working with migrants in the Czech Republic

Ing. Mariana Čapková, MBA, Chairwoman of the Committee for Education of ZHMP

Mgr. Ondřej Lněnička, director of Professor Švejcar's primary school in Prague 12

Mgr. Karin Marques, director of the Brigádníků primary school in Prague 10

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RNDr. Jindřich Kitzberger, Director for Pedagogy and the Concept of Education, Duhovka Group

Mgr. Lenka Hečková, lawyer, ČOSIV

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