

Paper

What Austria's teachers learn

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why professional
development is at least as
important as initial training

It will take about 15 to 20 years before the reformed teacher training system has an impact in the classroom. So teachers' professional development will play the decisive part in raising the quality of teaching.

Reforms aimed at improving Austria's schools have been widely discussed in the past few months and years. Rapid social change, the increased diversity of school pupils due to migration, and advances brought about by digitalisation are posing challenges for our school system. Political debate tends to focus on structural and organisational matters (school autonomy), equipment (such as laptops for all pupils) or the reform of teacher training. Continuing training and development of teachers is only rarely mentioned. If this topic does come up, it is usually connected with the question of how many courses teachers attend during the academic year and how many during school holidays. As the Court of Audit pointed out in a recent report, 41% of courses are offered during core contact hours. However, it is not only a question of when teachers attend professional development courses, but also in which topics. Actively shaping the design of continuing education courses for teachers is one of the most important ways to improve teaching standards. The effectiveness of this approach is usually felt in the short term, while the broader effects of reforms to the training system for young teachers only emerge in schools after a delay of 15 to 20 years. Many countries that perform strongly in international comparisons have recognised this and have changed their professional development set-ups. In our new study, education experts Wolfgang Feller and Anna Stürgkh analyse continuing education for teachers in Austria and compare this with reforms that have been introduced across Europe. Over the past few years, many of these countries have started to shift the emphasis of education-policy reforms away from initial training and towards continuing professional development. Real-life examples from Liechtenstein, the Netherlands and Singapore illustrate the innovative approaches adopted in other countries. Taking international trends into account, the authors identify professional development as a key aspect of improving the Austrian school system and put the case for making it the focal point of future reform plans.

In addition to the reform of teacher training colleges and the courses on offer (which has already started), the following measures would help to boost and manage teachers' participation in professional development programmes:

- » Measures designed to increase school autonomy should involve giving schools, teachers and regional authorities professional development budgets. The option of choosing private providers would promote quality-based competition.
- » Schools should implement professional staff-development structures. Head teachers should assume managerial and other responsibilities related to professional development, instead of leaving this entirely to teachers. These responsibilities would include giving advice, preparing development plans and monitoring.
- » School administrators should also facilitate cooperation between teachers, arrange regular opportunities for teachers to sit in on classes, and organise internal professional development programmes.
- » This should be preceded by reform of the conditions of service for teachers, in particular linking promotions and pay increases to measurable progress in professional development.
- » Finally, the conditions of service should specify a considerably higher level of compulsory professional development – this should be at the top end of the range for European countries (60–80 hours per year), with courses mainly held during school holidays.

Continuing education, not initial training, is the decisive factor in promoting changes in teaching practice.