

RURAL-URBAN DISPARITIES IN ROMANIAN PRE- UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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Abstract: In recent decades, disparities between urban and rural areas in Romanian education have become more pronounced, against a backdrop of growing development gaps between these areas and the migration and aging of the rural population. These development gaps are evident not only in school results, but also in access to resources, the quality of teaching staff and school infrastructure. Rural schools face a shortage of specialized staff and the phenomenon of teacher "commuting," which affects the continuity and quality of teaching. Teachers' salaries are generally low, and in rural areas there are insufficient financial incentives to compensate for the difficult living conditions. Rural schools often have poor infrastructure, a lack of modern teaching materials, laboratories, and access to technology. Teaching in these conditions is challenging and can be discouraging for teachers. Many rural students come from poor families, which adds pressure on teachers, who have to manage not only educational issues but also the social and health problems of their students. In this context, this paper provides a comparative analysis of the disparities between rural and urban education in Romania, based on statistical data, which may be useful for informing decisions in this area and reducing risks.

Keywords: disparities, insufficient financial incentives, comparative analysis

JEL Classification: I21, I25

Introduction

The restructuring of Romania's national education system, along with the introduction of new legislative regulations, has prompted a significant reorganization of the country's network of educational institutions. As a consequence of these reform measures, between 2007 and 2010, the total number of schools decreased by 642, representing a 7.8% reduction. The school-age population also declined, reaching levels in the 2010/2011 academic year that were 8.5% lower than those recorded in 2007/2008. Although higher education continued to expand during this period, its growth was inconsistent, largely influenced by developments in the private sector. Enrollment rates across all levels of education exhibited gender disparities, with 76.0% of boys and 79.3% of girls attending school in 2010/2011.

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In higher education, students predominantly enrolled in education (27.1%), economics (25.3%), and technical sciences (23.8%), while private institutions had the highest concentration of students in economics (37.1%). Corresponding with the decline in the school-age population, the total number of graduates fell across most educational levels, except in post-secondary and master's programs, which in 2009/2010 recorded increases of 48.1% and 9.4% compared to 2007/2008 and 2008/2009, respectively. By the end of the 2009/2010 academic year, the largest number of graduates came from high schools (over 204,000), followed closely by middle schools (199,000) and higher education (over 191,000).

The teaching workforce remained relatively stable over this period, with the exception of primary and lower secondary education, where the number of teachers declined by 10.1% compared to 2007/2008 and by 7.4% compared to 2009/2010. Overall staffing levels remain high, resulting in a decreasing student-teacher ratio. Projections indicate a continued decline in student numbers, varying by education level, with the steepest reductions expected in middle and high schools, followed by vocational secondary and higher education. According to World Bank simulations, the student-teacher ratio in high schools is projected to drop sharply from 12.17 to 7.6 by 2013. System-wide projections suggest a continuous and significant decline in this ratio, particularly in high school and higher education, whereas middle school ratios are expected to experience only slight decreases without a consistent trend (Feser & Isserman, 2006).

While demographic pressures on the education system are evident, appropriate policy responses remain unclear. One perspective suggests a need to reduce teaching staff at certain levels; however, low enrollment rates, particularly in secondary education, indicate a requirement for proactive measures by schools and teachers to attract and retain students (Feldmann, 2008). If no structural changes are implemented and current parameters such as class sizes are maintained, fully flexible hiring practices would nonetheless necessitate a reduction of over 50,000 teaching positions, with 80% of these reductions concentrated in secondary, middle, and high schools.

One of the major challenges in educational policy across European Union member states is tackling the disadvantages faced by groups at risk of educational marginalization (Chenic (Crețu), 2012). To address this, several countries are prioritizing increased investment in education as a long-term strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion. These efforts focus on preventing educational disparities by implementing effective early interventions, particularly through comprehensive child protection mechanisms. Additionally, education systems are being adapted to ensure that schools can meet the specific needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Policies also aim to reduce school dropout rates, reintegrate young people who have left the system prematurely, and expand opportunities for continuing education, thereby ensuring access to both general and vocational training for at-risk children and youth. Furthermore, educational institutions play a critical role in fostering social values, promoting cohesion, ensuring equal opportunities, and encouraging active civic engagement among citizens (Socol & Socol, 2012).

This set of measures within European educational policies highlights the importance of integrated strategies aimed at enhancing educational opportunities and promoting socio-professional inclusion for disadvantaged groups. Such strategies encompass not only educational interventions but also social protection measures and initiatives facilitating labor market integration. In Romania, the education sector has undergone extensive reforms over the past 21 years, involving both curricular content changes and significant institutional transformations.

Over the last five years, the development of national strategies has provided a framework for designing and implementing educational programs intended to increase access to education for marginalized groups and to modernize the educational system in line with European standards of institutional development. Notably, numerous strategies, national programs, and projects have

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been launched in recent years to improve learning conditions in Romanian schools and to reduce educational and social inequalities (Manole, A.M., 2012).

Despite considerable efforts in institutional development and systemic reform, challenges remain that continue to affect educational outcomes and quality. Programs implemented under pre-university education strategies, particularly those targeting rural education, aim to improve educational indicators. However, funding for the education system remains insufficient relative to existing needs. Rural education, in particular, must be prioritized, given its unique challenges. Although the Rural Education Revitalization Strategy was introduced in 2001, the measures it proposed—as well as subsequent programs addressing rural schools—require substantial investments and integrated solutions that address both material and human resources, as well as the quality and content of education. In summary, the current education and research system in Romania is not yet capable of sustaining a competitive position within the European Union or supporting sustainable economic growth.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, the reforms undertaken in Romania’s education system over the past two decades have laid the groundwork for significant progress in both curricular and institutional development. The implementation of integrated educational policies, aligned with European standards, demonstrates a clear commitment to enhancing opportunities for disadvantaged groups and promoting social inclusion. Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain, particularly regarding the quality and accessibility of education in rural areas. Despite numerous national strategies, programs, and projects targeting these issues, the insufficiency of funding continues to constrain the effectiveness of such initiatives. Rural schools, in particular, require tailored interventions that address both human and material resources, ensuring that educational content and teaching quality meet modern standards. Moreover, while programs aimed at pre-university education have improved certain indicators, systemic inequalities still impact student performance and outcomes. To achieve a fully competitive education system, Romania must combine substantial investment with integrated, sustainable policies that foster equal opportunities, reduce disparities, and support continuous professional development for educators. Ultimately, without coordinated efforts across all levels of the system, the potential of Romanian education to contribute to long-term economic growth and EU competitiveness remains limited. Ensuring equity, quality, and efficiency in education, particularly in rural contexts, is essential for building a modern, inclusive, and resilient educational framework capable of meeting both national and European development goals.

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