

## MEMORANDUM

On August 8, 1997, the parliament of Turkey, namely The Grand National Assembly, made a historical decision to increase the duration of compulsory education from five years to eight years, and The Ministry of National Education converged the lower schools (of five years) and middle schools (of three years) to form eight-year primary schools. The Primary Education Code 4306, has been discussed as one of the most critical and debated issues since then.

The rationales of the decision were clear and almost undisputably accepted by the political actors and the educational community of Turkey. To name a few, the aims were to increase the average educational attainment of the population from five years to eight years, to equalize the educational level of rural population with that of urban residents, to reach the universal goal of educational equality, to catch up with European Union countries in terms of any level of education, to raise educational quality and efficiency, to increase individual success of students, and to uptrend resource productivity in investment spendings. Parents, scholars and educational managers were clear with regards to the goals, yet many have been questioning whether these are attainable and the outcomes will satisfy the policy-makers. Some of the challenges facing this policy are outlined below.

**a. Gender parity:** According to UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) monitoring report of 2003/4, in *pre-primary education* which is also a part of primary education in many public and all private schools, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) of gross enrollment ratio for the country is 0.94 in favor of boys.

In terms of participation in *primary education*, the percentage of females proportionate to the total number of students has not changed, from 47.1% in 1990 to 47% in 2000. From the stand point of Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in primary education; while the total number is 100.6%, GPI is 0.92 in favor of boys. The latter was 0.94 in 1990 and the trend seemingly does not show a sign of improvement with regards to gender parity.

With all these figures, Turkey is listed among the countries with gender disparities. As a very recent note related with the issue, the UNESCO Turkey representative pointed out in a national newspaper last week (October 10-16, 2005) that in “Let the Girls to School” campaign, so far 150,000 of targeted 600,000 girls have been enrolled in a school with a rate of 25% showing that there is still a considerable population that needs to be reached for schooling.

**b. Physical needs:** One of the major purposes of the compulsory education code was to realize a student/classroom ratio of 30. According to The Ministry of National Education’s data of 2004-05 academic year, the national average is 43.6 despite the ongoing campaigns across the nation which helped the Ministry build a significant total of 56,031 classrooms between 1994 and 1998 (Ministry of National Education, 1999).

**c. Busing in primary education:** After the compulsory eight-year primary education code, the population in need of education increased. However, many small settlement units are spread over large areas throughout the country making education services difficult. In order to provide educational services, the Ministry initiated a

busing system to gather children from rural areas without schools to a central location. According to the Ministry's data, the number of pupils bussed increased significantly from 305 in two provinces in 1989-90 to 521,218 in 75 provinces in 1998-99.

Taking the eight-year education to each and every one of the 79,000 villages and sub-village settlements is a very difficult task. On the one hand, the practice of bussing in primary education is necessary for providing the children who live in small settlement units with better means of education, for expanding the primary education services in a balanced way countrywide, for assuring equality in opportunity and means of education, and for increasing the quality of education. On the other hand, while the aim is to offer the students sufficient building, facilities and teachers, the issue remains to be a challenge. During the winter, especially in cold regions there have been so many inconveniences for students and it became ordinary to see pictures appearing in national newspapers with regards to the difficulties of children waiting for the buses, some of which do not appear at all because of delays in payments by the authorities.

**d. Quality and PISA results:** According to PISA 2003 results, Turkish students' average math score was 423 while the OECD average was 500. With this figure, Turkey was 35<sup>th</sup> out of 41 countries participating in the project. The country average from the reading literacy domain was 441 and Turkey was rated as 34<sup>th</sup>, similar to math literacy. Similar but a bit worse than these two domains, in scientific literacy, Turkey was rated as 36<sup>th</sup> with a country average of 434. The results, which can be seen as valuable domestic data and a long-term monitoring tool, clearly identify a quality deficiency in primary education.

It should be noted after all, however, that the challenges facing this historical shift of Turkey have not changed the fact that extending the duration of compulsory education was the right decision to make. A great majority of Turkish people surrounding the educational cycle repeat their beliefs that despite its drawbacks and challenges, eight-year compulsory education was a need for the future of Turkish children. After all, the purpose has not changed. It is “to ensure that every Turkish child acquires the basic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and habits to become a good citizen, is raised in line with the national moral concepts and is prepared for life and for the next education level parallel to his/her interests and skills.” (Ministry of National Education, 2002)

#### **References:**

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