

Switzerland

„Schools are saturated with ideology“

The new Syllabus for high schools wants to improve the world. Critics warn of indoctrination, and some cantons have already expressed opposition

by Nadja Pastega, Journalist at the SonntagsZeitung



Nadja Pastega.
(Photo Tagesanzeiger)

Reading, writing and arithmetic are no longer enough. Schools are getting more and more tasks. The draft for a new framework Syllabus is now available for the Swiss A-level schools. It is 136 pages long. In an earlier version there were even 400 pages.



(Photo ma)

The topic “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD) will now be included. The ultimate goal according to the curriculum entitled: “transformation into a sustainable society”. This is not just about protecting the climate and biodiversity, but also fighting against “racism, social and economic injustices or unfair gender distributions”.

Nobody can object to these goals for a just world. But the question is how they should be achieved – and how they will be implemented in schools. And this is where the problems begin for *Alain Pichard*, a member of the Green Liberals in the Bern Cantonal Parliament and, until his retirement, Switzerland's best-known teacher.

Teachers should not enforce their opinions upon pupils

“The task of school is to teach knowledge so that pupils are able to form their own judgments as responsible citizens” says Pichard. Instead, the new Syllabus defines attitudes as competences which need to be evaluated and rated. “Our education system is therefore developing into a dangerous direction that could lead to totalitarian re-education.”

There is a ban against indoctrination at schools; teachers are not allowed to dictate their opinions to pupils. They must also deal with controversial political issues. Opposing positions must therefore be dealt with. However, the sec-

ondary school Syllabus is riddled with political messages and certain topics – others are simply left out. For example, pupils are expected to reflect on the greenhouse effect and solar energy. Nuclear energy is not mentioned.

The Syllabus is riddled with phrases that are more reminiscent of a party program than of objective subject areas: “fair society”, “environmental as well as social limits”, “intra- and intergenerational justice”, “people of all gender identities”, “holistic”, “transformative”, “socio-ecological transformation”.

Syllabus: “Biased wording”

Some cantons criticised the ESD topic during the consultation procedure over the new framework syllabus. “It is obviously a political agenda”, Lucerne noted. The Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich warned against actively influencing the principle of political neutrality in schools and suggested some of the wording should therefore be “reconsidered”. Obwalden concluded that the wording was “too tendentious”. The canton of Aargau and the headmasters’ conference of Zurich secondary schools are also “completely unhappy” with the ESD provisions in the new syllabus.

The new regulation is part of the reform “Ongoing development of the A-levels” initiated by the *Conference of Cantonal Education Ministries* (EDK) together with the *Federal Department of*

Economic Affairs, Education and Research (WBF). Its aim is to make the Swiss A-level certificate uniform throughout Switzerland and to ensure students' ability to study so that universities and colleges do not raise their own entry barriers with entrance examinations.

Lucius Hartmann, President of the Association of Swiss secondary School Teachers, is backing the new guidelines: "It is undisputed that a new syllabus is needed. The current one dates back to 1994." The secondary schools should not only ensure their graduates have a university entrance qualification, but also a "deeper social maturity". The sustainable development of society is stipulated in the Swiss Federal Constitution, "which is why it needs to be taught at school".

He points to a study conducted by the canton of Aargau, which found that the majority of teachers at school were politically neutral. The canton commissioned this survey to counter an A-level paper by three high school students which revealed that there was a "left-wing bias" among teachers. The canton publicised the results of the study as a proof of good faith. Yet the study also revealed that many pupils feel disadvantaged because of their political opinions.

Even the term "in-depth social maturity" is causing criticism. "What does this mean?" asks *Mario Andreotti*, German scholar and historian. "That I should glue myself to the streets for climate change?" He taught at secondary schools for 38 years and is the author of the book "Eine Kultur schafft sich ab" [A culture abolishes it-

self], which takes a critical look at the school reforms in recent years.

Politicians delegate conflicts to schools

"No educational mandate for schools can be derived from the wording in the Swiss Federal Constitution", says education politician Pichard. A just world has always been a lofty goal in which economic and other interests clash. "There is a trend for politicians to delegate such conflicts to the schools", says Pichard. "Schools are becoming increasingly ideologically saturated."

"Newspeak from the pedagogic fashion laboratories", says Pichard.

The language of the new syllabus is also being criticised. There is talk of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, of transversal teaching and transversal competences, of transversal inclusion of digitalisation, of primary and secondary syllabus structures. Or more specifically:

"Subject-specific and interdisciplinary skills are acquired from a transversal perspective when didactic domain-specific and cross-domain knowledge is applied to recognise interrelationships and to solve technical and social problems in relevant functional areas."

Andreotti describes it as "it's all Chinese". "Newspeak from the pedagogic fashion laboratories", says Pichard.

The cantons are now responsible for implementing the framework syllabus, due to come into force in August. The regulations will apply to all secondary schools in Switzerland.

Source: «*SonntagsZeitung*», 18 February 2024
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