

Uzbek Education Fiasco

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Uzbek schools are in chaos following a ban on Soviet era textbooks.

The Uzbek education system is in crisis. Since independence in 1991, the government has outlawed all vestiges of the old Soviet school system, including textbooks. But production of new ones has failed to meet demand.

Two months into the academic year and parents across the country have no idea where they are going to find textbooks for their children. According to the education ministry's own figures, production of textbooks in some subjects is around 50 per cent of what's required.

"Printing houses are experiencing problems with shortages of paper, printing ink - after all, this stuff has to be bought in from neighbouring countries," said Shomukhtar Shomansurov, the head of the education ministry's textbooks department.

As part of the state's national education programme, schools have been ordered to destroy all books printed before 1995, because they employed teaching methodology developed by Soviet academics.

"I've been looking for a botany textbook for fifth year students for two months already," said Ramilya Ibatova, a mother from Tashkent. "The school's library has these books, but they were published in Soviet times and they won't give them to us. I don't think a lot has changed in botany since Uzbekistan turned independent."

It seems extraordinary that the education ministry is insisting on a blanket ban of all Soviet era books, while clearly incapable of providing alternatives.

"When we understood we couldn't provide the children with new textbooks, we decided to use the old ones, because we're obliged to give the children an education," said Nukus headmaster Bibaisha Ketebaeva.

"But when the ministry comes round we get into trouble and are reprimanded, even though the basics of chemistry, physics and mathematics haven't changed for centuries and are apolitical. We're glad there hasn't been time to destroy all the books."

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Finance, struggling to cope with a lack of resources, has passed a directive aimed at increasing class sizes. In the Djizak region, 700 small classes have already been subsumed into larger ones, putting dozens of teachers out of work.

Uzbekistan's 70-year spell in the Soviet Union is described as a "colonial" period in the new education programme. References to "Red" and "Soviet" have been expunged. Writers from that era are no longer studied.

But this leads to a paradox. It seems the "colonialists" paid much more attention to educating their charges than the current independent government. Money and resources were not spared during the "colonial" era. Schools were opened in remote areas to cater for as few as five or ten pupils. Textbooks

were abundant, parents only had to worry about getting the latest edition.

"Because of this situation in education the first people to suffer will be the Uzbek population of the country," said Yuri Gershovich, a Russian-speaking resident of Tashkent. "We have one or two kids, and we can always find resources for their education. Uzbeks tend to have about five kids and for the most part they live in rural areas."

The government is right when it says its shameful that the country, ten years after independence, hasn't yet established its own system of education and still needs to rely on Soviet books.

But to destroy the resources of the old system, before ensuring new resources are available is foolish. It would be better to admit the country is not yet ready to provide its own education materials, than to raise a generation of poorly-educated and illiterate people.

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