

IREX Final Report

1. Topic: To return and investigate sustainability factors in education reform initiated by the previous Minister of Education and Culture in Kyrgyzstan. With the assistance of various NGOs and USAID, she attempted major reforms (or plans for reform) from January of 2002. However, she failed to survive the government reshuffling of May, 2003. Now that she has been replaced, this research was concerned with tracking what if anything remained from her earlier efforts.
2. Policy Relevance: The argument is made that education reform in former Soviet states must come from outside of the titular ministries in these countries as education ministers are of minor importance in national politics, and human capital theories seeking to "rationalize" education are not part of these ministry's understandings of the purposes of schooling. From whence would/does significant school change come? And what are the internal barriers to education change in Central Asia?
3. The research involved revisiting and interviewing major players in 2003 about the year-long school improvement efforts in the Kyrgyz Republic which were advanced in 2002. I interviewed at length the former Minister of Education and Culture, the current presidential advisor on education reform, the previous staff person contracted by USAID to complete the 2002 "Action Plan" for reform, and the primary USAID subcontractor responsible for instituting the new national testing system in the country. There were additional interviews with previous "key informants" on my earlier work in the national pedagogical university and with officials in the American University of Kyrgyzstan. Efforts to interview the current Minister of Education and Culture were thwarted by her schedule during the target period and perhaps lack of interest in aims of the research. Interviews of 1 -3 hours in length with the above figures (5) were all completed between November 27, 2002 and December 7, 2002. Interviews were all completed in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

4. The long and extensive "Action Plan," which specified over 40 reform items and timelines for achieving them, appears to no longer exist in the Ministry of Education. These reforms were in the areas of teacher retraining, school organization, ministry reorganization, and higher education. Testing reform for college entrance has seemingly survived the transition to the new Minister, since the President of the Republic was widely applauded for these efforts in a recent trip to the US. He has publicly expressed support for the testing reforms; so has the Minister. At the same time, little progress in improving elementary and secondary education has been showed since the new Minister came into office in June, 2002. Her administration remains full of professionals from previous ministers, most of which are holdovers from Soviet days. It appears unlikely that meaningful changes in education policy can come from actors tied to previous operational schemes.
5. My suggestions for future research would be to integrate higher into the government structure to watch for changes in thinking and policy formulation at the presidential level relating to education. I believe it is true that "business as usual" in education will continue in Kyrgyzstan if and until education reform is pushed from above the education ministry.
6. See #5.