NIK on material support for schoolchildren

The communes cannot fully use the funds allocated to support the poorest schoolchildren. None of the state-owned institutions knows if half a billion zloty allocated to this purpose every year goes to all the children in need. It is the worst with supporting talented schoolchildren – nearly a half of the audited communes and schools do not provide for any scholarships for academic merit or sports achievements.

Every year the state allocates nearly PLN 500 million for material support for schoolchildren. NIK verified how these funds are used. The audit covered the Ministry of National Education, 19 communes and 52 schools in 10 provinces.

The communes that organise support for schoolchildren in cooperation with the schools cannot fully use the money provided to them. 9 percent of funds allocated to material support returned to the state budget in 2009. In 2010, the percentage of unused funds reached as much as 16 percent. The extreme examples are the communes of the Śląskie Province which failed to use more than one third of the funds transferred to them. It is the worst with using funds from the Government Programme "School Starter Kit" designed for the purchase of text books for the poorest children. In 2009, local governments returned nearly 30 percent of these funds and in 2010 it was already above 38 percent.

According to the data of the EU Statistical Office (Eurostat) of 2008, 22 percent of kids in Poland live below the relative poverty line. However, neither the Ministry of National Education nor any other state-owned institution knows whether the material support reaches all the needy schoolchildren. The Ministry does not verify how the funds are distributed and used because it is not required by the regulations. Most communes do not even take the effort of diagnosing the needs of schoolchildren in their areas (during the audit only 9 out of 19 communes did it). Only four communes evaluated the course and effects of their actions. Also the local government officials excuse themselves by the lack of a relevant legal obligation.

The fact that the communal governments in some cases break the provisions of the Education System Act makes it even worse. The NIK auditors pointed out that additional requirements have been included in the regulations concerning the provision of financial aid to schoolchildren. For instance, in Radom the support depended on the children's attendance of classes. At the same time, in some communes schoolchildren receive scholarships only after three or four months from starting their education. As many as 68 percent of the audited communes delayed their decisions on granting financial aid. An extreme example is Radom where the decisions were delayed by 32 up to 83 days.

The communes prefer to grant scholarships in the form of money. The authorities of Radom and Nowy Sącz explain they did not provide other forms of support because of some personnel and organisational problems. The Presidents of Włocławek and Toruń considered that method as the most flexible one. However, according to NIK, when the support is limited only to handing over money without controlling its use, there is no guarantee that the funds will be designed for education. Besides, this system copies the tasks of social welfare. A better form of support would be to organise and finance extra educational classes by the communes, reaching beyond the teaching schemes. This form – as opposed to material or financial support – has a chance to stimulate cognitive needs in children and level off their educational opportunities.

The local governments also have a problem with supporting talented schoolchildren. 8 out of 19 communes did not provide for any funds for scholarships for academic merit or sports achievements. It is no better in schools. 22 of 52 audited institutions did not move for funds for such scholarships at all.