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SELECTION OF PRINCIPALS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN BULGARIA – CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Yonka Parvanova,
Bozhidara Kriviradeva,
Danko Kalapish,
Deyana Milusheva
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)

Abstract. The article examines the selection and qualification of school principals in Bulgaria in light of recent reforms and the adoption of Regulation No. 16 (2022). The regulation redefines the role of principals, emphasizing leadership and managerial competencies rather than purely administrative functions. The study is based on surveys and focus groups with principals and Regional Department of Education experts, providing diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of the new framework. Findings indicate progress in ensuring transparency and objectivity of procedures, with interviews and case-solving tasks seen as valuable assessment tools. However, concerns remain regarding the formalized defence of development concepts, uniform case studies, and the composition of selection committees. The research further highlights the necessity of practice-oriented training, mentoring, and continuous professional development to support principals in their evolving role. Strengthening the link between selection, qualification, and school management challenges is essential for sustainable improvement.

Keywords: selection of school principals; school principals qualification

The role of the principal in the pre-school and school education system

Bulgarian education system has undergone a series of transformations in the past 20 years that have significantly changed not only the way it functions, but also the role and powers of the main actors involved in its management. After 2008, a specific quasi-market model of financing and management of educational institutions was introduced in the system of pre-school and school education in Bulgaria, which placed significant responsibilities in the hands of school principals[1)].

These powers, together with the duties assigned to them for the overall planning, organisation and control of all processes in the school institution, place the school

principal in a key position not so much to carry out decrees, but to implement a real strategic vision and policy for the development of the school, to build its public image and to be responsible for the overall results of its functioning.

In the context of these specific responcibilities of the principal, the questions about his/her professional qualifications and skills (Vatsov, 2015) reinforce the need for the establishment of a quality mechanism for the selection of managers in the educational system in the country.

Till 2022, competitions for principals of schools, kindergartens and service units were regulated by the Law on Pre-school and School Education and the Labor Code. In 2022, Ministry of Education and Science issued Regulation No. 16 on conducting competitions for the position of "principals". The Ministry of Education's intentions are, through these new procedures and mechanisms, to search not so much for administrators, as for managers and leaders capable of planning and implementing school's activities, inspiring and motivating students and teaching staff, and developing the school by integrating innovation into its activities and achieving a higher quality of education.

Starting from the key role of the principals in the management of educational institutions, the issue of criteria, mechanisms and procedures for the selection of managers in the education system is gaining real importance. Regulation 16 sets out a two-stage procedure for the selection of principals: 1) Test, prepared by the Ministry of Education, which is the same for all candidates and is released to the respective Regional Departments of Education (RDE) on the day of the examination. The test is anonymous and the result of the test (a minimum of 30 out of a possible 50 points) determines admission to the second stage of the competition; 2) Candidates present to the committee a previously prepared and submitted concept for the development of the specific institution for which they apply, answer questions about it and solve two case studies, which they draw from a bank of case studies prepared in advance by the Ministry of Education and Science for the specific type of schoo,l (primary, secondary, vocational, high school, etc.). The total score of the two stages determines whether the candidate will be qualified to take the place, with a minimum of 60 points being required for inclusion in the ranking.

Regulation 16 also outlines key criteria for the evaluation of principals, as well as a significant change in the composition of the committee conducting the competition, as it now includes representatives of the public councils of educational institutions, thus providing parents with the opportunity to participate in the selection of the principal for the educational institution where their children are educated (Parvanova et al., 2025)

2. Research design

This paper presents the results of a study on the mechanisms and procedures for the selection of principals of educational institutions conducted in 2024 – 2025

among key subjects – principals, experts from Regional Departments of Education (RDE) and teachers.

The main objective of the study is to analyze the system of selection and qualification of principals of educational institutions and to outline possible ways and mechanisms for its improvement in the context of high expectations for the management staff in the system of preschool and school education.

The research questions are:

– What is the current status and evaluation of the criteria, mechanisms and procedures for selection of principals of educational institutions as formulated in Regulation 16 and after their implementation in two successive competitive procedures (winter and summer of 2024)?

– What opportunities and recommendations do key stakeholders suggest for improvement of the criteria, mechanisms and procedures for the selection of principals of educational institutions?

The study incorporates quantitative and qualitative research methods in an attempt not just to highlight the main perspectives and evaluations of respondents, but to deepen understanding of the reasoning behind these evaluations:

– An online survey among principals, Regional Departments of Education experts, and teachers;

– Focus groups with principals and Regional Department of Education experts;

Participants in online survey are 566, with females greatly outnumbering males (79% to 21%). Their professional positions are presented on Figure 1.

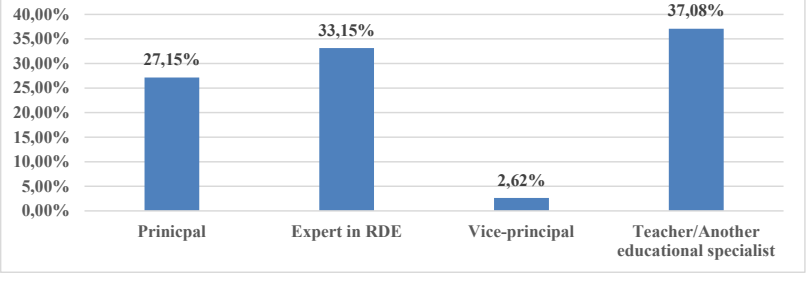


Figure 1. Professional occupation of respondents

The age characteristics of the respondents confirm the trend towards an ageing workforce in the education system. The group with the highest average age is the group of principals (52.11 years), and they also have the highest proportion of persons over 49 years of age – 75%. The average age of teachers is 47 years and that of Regional Department of Education experts is 51 years.

Among the principals who participated in the study, the largest proportion consists of those managing primary schools (46.48%), followed by principals

of secondary schools (19%) and principals of vocational high schools (12%). The remaining institutional types (profiled high schools, primary schools, combined schools, and specialized schools) each account for between 2% and 7%. Kindergarten principals represent only 2.82% of the sample. More than 87% of the principals lead municipal institutions, while only two principals are heads of private educational institutions.

With regard to teachers, the predominant group comprises subject teachers at the lower secondary and upper secondary levels, accounting for nearly 60% of respondents, while primary school teachers represent 39%. Only 1% of respondents work in kindergartens, and five of the participants report holding positions as educational counselor, speech therapist, or teacher in an all-day learning group.

Focus groups were implemented in order to better understand the opinions, evaluations and suggestions of the main subjects interested and involved in the process of selection of managers – principals of educational institutions and experts in Regional Department of Education. The implementation of the focus groups is subordinated to the idea of gathering the views and opinions of those working in different regions of the country. Currently, there are 28 Regional Departments of Education in the country, one in each administrative region. There are two main criteria for the selection of regions for the focus groups:

– Population in the district;

– The results of the National Maturity examination in Bulgarian language and literature in 2024.

In each of the six big administrative planning regions, three districts were selected for conducting focus groups: 1) the district with the largest population; 2) the district with the smallest population; 3) the district (of the remaining ones) that is closest in terms of its State Examination score to the national average score of Good 4.32 for 2024. Based on these criteria, 18 Regional Department of Education were selected. Of these, two departments declined to participate. In two directorates only focus groups with directors were implemented due to the inability of experts to participate in the study. One RDE could not participate in the study due to objective reasons, despite the initial confirmation.

A total of 13 focus groups with experts and 15 focus groups with principals were held in a total of 16 Regional Department of Education with 104 participating RDE experts and 125 participating principals. Only 4% of principals managed municipal kindergartens. Due to the low participation of kindergarten principals in the focus groups and the questionnaire survey there is no sufficient data to make relevant conclusions about the selection of kidergaren principals.

The main themes of discussion in the focus groups were related to the key questions posed in the research and to the results, obtained through the survey. The data and findings presented below in this paper are a combination of the survey and the results of the focus groups.

The results presented here deepen the preliminary analysis of online survey data (Parvanova et al., 2025) by adding opinions and trends from focus groups and presenting a more clear picture of what are the challenges and perspectives for the selection of future educational leaders.

3. Evaluations and attitudes towards principal selection mechanisms and criteria

3.1. Attitudes toward the selection methods applied in the two stages of the procedure

For the purposes of this analysis, the main questions in the questionnaire were formulated as statements and/or suggestions, which respondents rated on a 5-point scale, depending on the wording of the question. The five-point scale is transformed into a binary scale where:

A full positive rating/agreement equates to (2) points.

Partially positive assessment/agreement equates to (1) point.

Lack of judgement/ Cannot decide equates to (0) points.

Partially negative evaluation/disagreement equals (-1) point.

Completely negative assessment/complete disagreement equates to (-2) points.

This allows an average score in the range (-2) to (+2) to be calculated for each statement, indicating the extent to which respondents rate the statement positively or negatively or agree with it.

In general, the selection methods applied in the course of the procedure are considered mostly appropriate by all three groups of respondents (principal, experts, teachers) (Parvanova et al., 2025, p. 342). The interview with the candidate, in which the defence of the concept of the institution's development and case studies occurs, is considered as the most appropriate in the course of selection. At the same time, the concept defense itself garnered the lowest score of the four methods included in the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Selection methods score for suitability

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Written exam with a test	566	-2	2	1,30	1,019
Interview with candidates	566	-2	2	1,69	0,735
Case solving	566	-2	2	1,57	0,808
Defense of the concept for strategic development of the institution	566	-2	2	1,19	1,217

Subsequent data analysis shows that the scores of RDE experts and principals, participating in the survey, are not homogeneous and there are significant

differences among them (Table 2). In the T-test conducted to compare the mean scores, particularly striking is the fact that the scores of the ***principals are statistically significantly lower for all selection methods compared to the scores of the experts***, with the largest difference in the scores of these two groups specifically for the defense of the concept (score of 0.77 by the principals and 1.19 by the experts).

Table 2. Comparison of average scores of selection methods between principals and experts from Regional Department of Education

Selection method	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean diff.
Written exam with a test	-3,211	293,287	0,001	-0,316
Interview with candidates	-2,064	302,706	0,040	-0,157
Case solving	-3,543	304,526	0,000	-0,309
Defence of the concept for strategic development of the institution	-2,983	312,615	0,003	-0,423

Data from the focus groups indicate that it is the development and defense of a concept for the institution that proves to be the most problematic element in the course of the selection procedure. In addition it is no longer seen by many head teacher candidates as part of the preparation for a management position in a particular institution, but as a mere formality.

"I've been 30 years in my school - how is someone from outside going to make a better concept than me?" (Headteacher).

"I saw a concept where the name of the school was not even changed – a copy-paste work" (RDE expert).

Approval for the test, taken by the candidates, is relatively high, although some questions are considered vague, ambiguous or misleading. For the experts, the test is a good option as long as the assessment of knowledge about the regulations is strengthened.

Case solving received the highest approval from all three groups of respondents, with an average score above (1.5) out of a maximum of (2). Still, there are some concerns about the objectivity of evaluation.

"It is often a matter of luck which case you will draw and in what area - whether one that you know well or another that you are not as strong in your knowledge" (Principal).

"We are given answers and scoring for them for each case study, but they cannot capture all the principals' ideas for a solution, which are often subject to purely practical arguments" (RDE expert).

Applied mechanisms by which the selection procedure is constructed and happens in practice are an important part of the selection procedure. Approval of different aspects of these mechanisms are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. To what extent these aspects of the selection procedure are considered appropriate?

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
The case studies should be prepared by the Ministry of Education and be the same for all types of educational institutions, regardless of the region in which they are located.	566	-2	2	0,87	1,320
A minimum overall score of 60 points (for both stages of the competition) is an appropriate threshold for ranking candidates.	566	-2	2	0,89	1,134
In the event of an equal number of points, candidates with a higher professional qualification level and additional acquired qualifications should have an advantage in the ranking.	566	-2	2	0,95	1,220
A minimum score of 30 points (out of 50 possible) is an appropriate threshold for admission to the next stage of the competition.	566	-2	2	1,05	1,131
The test, as part of the written exam, should be the same for all participants applying for the same type of educational institution.	566	-2	2	1,39	1,058
The test, as part of the written exam, should be taken anonymously by all participants in the competition.	566	-2	2	1,57	0,945

The significantly lower scores on two of the parameters clearly emerge – identical case studies, regardless of the region in which the institution is located, and the existence of a minimum threshold of 60 points for the two stages of the competition so the applicant can qualify for the position.

In terms of the same cases in different regions of the country, the scores of the three groups of respondents in the survey differ significantly – principals give an average overall score of 0.4 points, experts from the RDE – 1.33, and teachers – 0.81 points.

With regard to the minimum threshold for a 'successful candidate' to be considered for the post, teachers are much less likely to consider the current 60 points to be sufficient, which is an indicator that they have higher expectations of management candidates.

At the same time, several key points emerged in the focus groups regarding the minimum thresholds both in the first stage and throughout the procedure.

Firstly, the threshold of 30 points in the test (first stage) for admission to interview was considered to be broadly appropriate. On the one hand, some principals and experts consider this threshold to be lower than necessary, as it gives rise to specific situations where a person with an average level of administrative and legal knowledge can pass the test and reach the second stage and this raises other problems. On the other hand, in some regions of the country, experts expressed concerns that raising this threshold and the general threshold for passing the selection procedure would lead to a situation where there would be no successful candidates.

Secondly, a serious issue raised in the focus groups is the fact that the 60-point threshold for ranking candidates, as currently calculated, creates precedents where a candidate who has passed the test with the maximum number of 50 points, only needs to have a concept for the development of the institution that meets the requirements, which carries 10 points, and that is enough to qualify without even being able to defend it or answer the questions asked in the case studies.

Criteria for assessing candidates in the second stage of the procedure.

A key issue in the selection procedure is the question of what competences of the candidates are assessed and how it is ensured that persons with the qualities and skills suitable for the managerial position are selected as heads of educational institutions.

Regulation 16 explicitly sets out the criteria for the assessment of candidates in the second stage, in which the interview, the defense of the concept and case studies take place. Data from the online survey indicated that communication skills, the ability to search and find solutions, the ability to work in a team and, surprisingly, regulations emerged as key and relevant to the assessment of candidates, garnering the highest approval rating of over 1.7 points (Figure. 2).

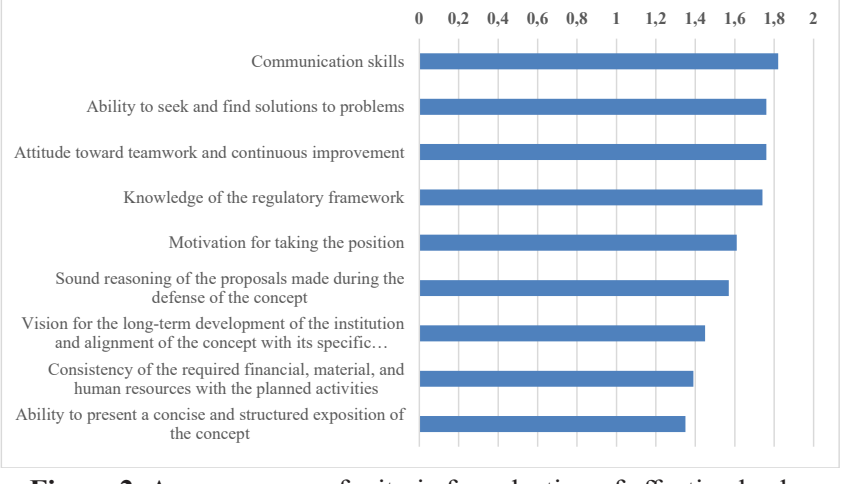


Figure 2. Average score of criteria for selection of effective leaders

On the other hand, the focus groups shared quite divergent views on what qualities and competencies should be assessed in the course of the competition procedure for principals.

"The principal cannot take the position and start calling me for elementary reports and other things he has to prepare because he doesn't know his law and regulations"(RDE expert).

Most of the principals were of the opinion that although regulations are important, they are not determinant for assessing their managerial competencies, and more emphasis should be placed on conflict resolution skills, communication, teamwork, ability to plan and integrate innovation.

"It is important to know the norms, but asking questions about quoting articles and paragraphs in the course of the interview is quite ineffective and does not provide information about the candidate's real managerial qualities" (Principals, who underwent the new selection procedure).

In relation to the assessment criteria, the participants were given the opportunity in the course of the survey to assess the extent to which the two main parts of the second stage of the competition - the concept defense and the case studies - could provide objective and sufficient information to assess the skills specified in the Regulations. The quantitative data from the survey indicate that, overall, both methods are highly rated as capable of gathering objective information to apply the

assessment criteria set out in the Regulations (Table 4). The average method score was calculated for the whole sample (the three groups of respondents) based on the ratings of the suitability of the respective method for gathering information for the assessment of all the criteria specified. The reliability of the scale in both methods is confirmed by the high Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.934 for Defending a concept for the respective school and 0.928 for the Case Solving, which allows the calculation of an overall average method score.

Table 4. Suitability of selection method for accessing different selection criteria

Selection criteria	The defense of the concept can provide objective information for the application of the respective criterion	The defense of the concept can provide objective information for the application of the respective criterion
Communication skills	1,62	1,57
Ability to seek and find solutions to problems	1,52	1,54
Attitude toward teamwork and continuous improvement	1,52	1,48
Knowledge of the regulatory framework	1,51	**1,55**
Motivation for taking the position	1,42	1,33
Sound reasoning of the proposals made during the defense of the concept	1,38	1,22
Vision for the long-term development of the institution and alignment of the concept with its specific characteristics	1,25	1,07
Consistency of the required financial, material, and human resources with the planned activities	1,24	1,15
Ability to present a concise and structured exposition of the concept	1,13	1,09
Average evaluation of the method	**1,40**	**1,33**

It is evident that the criteria for assessing the candidates during the second stage of the competition, as specified in Regulation 16, are currently rather positively perceived

and the two main selection methods, concept defense and case studies, are generally considered appropriate for gathering sufficient information to apply these criteria to the candidates.

The question arises, however, to what extent the criteria thus stated correspond to the leadership potential, skills and attitudes of the principals and to what extent the way the interview is organised can provide clear, objective and sufficient information for the future development of the selected candidates as leaders of educational institutions.

Initial survey data indicate that, overall, principals and experts consider the current selection procedures to be more objective, provide more opportunities to assess the managerial competence of candidates, are more transparent, and are more effective in selecting quality management staff than the procedures prior to the adoption of Regulation 16 in 2022 (Parvanova et al., 2025, pp. 352 – 355). However, a deeper look into the evaluations of the current selection procedures and mechanisms reveals a different picture (Table 5).

Table 5. Current selection procedures

	Overall score	**Scores – Principals**	**Scores – Experts in RDE**	**Scores – Teachers**
N	**566**	**158**	**196**	**212**
Are suitable for selecting candidates with good managerial qualities	0,66	0,49	**0,85**	0,62
Are fair	0,58	0,42	**0,85**	0,45
Can provide objective information about the candidate's social and civic competence	0,58	0,42	**0,73**	0,55
Create a sense of equality among the candidates	0,58	0,32	**0,90**	0,47
Can provide objective information about the candidates' managerial competencies	0,54	0,30	**0,74**	0,53
Give all stakeholders the opportunity to participate fully and equally	0,54	0,28	**0,82**	0,48
Can ensure an objective evaluation of the candidates	0,49	0,25	**0,71**	0,45
Can provide objective information about the candidates' pedagogical competence	0,48	0,32	**0,90**	0,47
Are less appropriate compared to previous selection procedures	0,16	0,29	-0,05	0,25

It can be clearly seen that the overall scores, according to the binary scale, are rather low, albeit positive. What is particularly striking is that principals have the lowest agreement with all indicators compared to the other two groups of respondents. The experts from the RDE give the highest scores, but even theirs do not reach the value (1) - rather agree with the mentioned statements. Even when taking into account the opinions of only those principals who have taken up the job under the new procedure (57 respondents), the overall result does not change significantly, with scores again below 0.7 on all indicators, except for the ability of the current procedures to select candidates with good managerial qualities (0.74).

These data indicate that the stated positive attitudes toward the selection methods, the criteria for assessing candidates in the second stage, and the relationship between methods and criteria can indeed be called into question when looking at the overall assessment of the current procedure on the parameters mentioned above – fairness, objectivity, ability to select candidates with good managerial qualities and possessing the competences described in the Principals' professional profile under Regulation 15 on teaching professionals.

Evaluations and attitudes towards the composition of the competition panel

A key issue that may provide a partial explanation for the low scores for key characteristics and capabilities of the selection procedures and criteria is the question of the composition of the panel.

The survey data strongly suggests that one of the participants on principal selection committees is highly objectional and that is the representative of Community councils in schools (Table 6).

Table 6. Is it suitable for these subjects to be part of selection committee?

	Overall score	**Scores – Principals**	**Scores – Experts in RDE**	**Scores – Teachers**
N	**566**	**158**	**196**	**212**
Representative of the Ministry of Education (for state schools)	1,43	1,31	1,81	1,16
Representatives of the Regional Education Department	1,39	1,55	1,83	0,85
Representative of the municipal administration (for municipal schools)	0,85	0,79	1,34	0,44
Representative of the school's Community Council	0,32	-0,25	0,19	0,87

The overall low agreement score (0.32) is due to the strong negative evaluation of principals (-0.25) and the low, albeit positive, evaluation of PEC experts (0.19).

Even the teachers, who were more likely to recognise the Community council representative as an appropriate member of the committee, gave an overall score below 1 (0.87). The other entity that has an overall positive rating but with different weights from different groups is the representative of the municipal administration as the representative of the funding body for municipal schools. While the experts from the RDE rate his participation positively, the teachers are much more skeptical, as are the principals.

Both subjects in the selection committee were discussed within focus groups with principals and experts. The main arguments, put forward by the principals against the participation of the community council representatives as an equal voting participant in the committee are:

– lack of competence to assess the managerial qualities of the candidates;

– difficulties in setting up Community Councils, especially in small schools working with vulnerable pupils and parents with low socio-economic background, which makes it almost impossible to involve a representative of this body in the selection panel;

– the binding of the Community Council to a potential 'internal candidate' for the post;

– inability to attract and sometimes retain the representative of the Community Council for the second stage of the competition.

"*We had to close the exits of the RDE and go around the floors to make sure that all members of the public councils were present and able to participate in the interviews." (RDE expert)*

"We have no mechanism to compel them to participate." (RDE expert) "Nowhere is there any guidance on what happens to the interview process and the competition in general if the public council representative doesn't show up or doesn't participate in the process." (RDE expert)

Of course, there are positive examples of the community Council's involvement in the competition procedure, but this is usually linked to the personal and/or professional qualities of the individual and not so much to his/her status as a member of the Community Council.

In at least half of the RDE where focus groups with experts were held, practices were shared where a person, who is an employee of the respective municipal administration and/or has a direct employment relationship with the mayor of the municipality is elected as the representative of the Community council as his/hers children study in the school in question. This is considered an indirect enlargement of the influence of the municipal administration in the selection procedure, which raised a lot of objections among RDE experts.

In general, the presence of the representative of the Community council on the committee is not perceived very positively, and recommendations for improvement in this respect are mainly related to his participation in the process as an observer,

with the right to an advisory vote, but without the right to actually evaluate the candidates.

Contradictory opinions are also expressed by principals and experts about the role of local government representatives on selection committees for municipal school principals. The positive assessment of their involvement is argued on the grounds that they know the particular school best, the local authority representative is usually a representative of the Education Department in the municipality or at least he/she actively works with educational institutions and has the capacity and knowledge to actively participate in the evaluation. At the other pole are the opinions that often the local authority tries to influence more than necessary the selection of a "desired" candidate, which RDE experts mostly link to the existence of lobbyist and sometimes familial ties between the candidates for the position and the leadership of the respective municipality, especially in small villages and cities.

Whether these conflicting assessments are due to inherited and still existing to some extent beliefs that political relationships and connections have an influence on the selection of principals is difficult to answer at this stage and should be sought to reduce and ensure optimal objectivity of the selection procedure.

Despite the rather contradictory attitude towards the representatives of the Community councils and local authorities in the competition committees, the survey does not reveal a subject around whom principals, teachers and experts from the Regional Department of Education unite as a suitable member of the committee for the competitions for heads of educational organisations. Survey respondents were offered a set of statements about possible subjects to include on the committee. The overall scores of all statements were low, and some were completely rejected (Table 7).

Table 7. Level of agreement

	Overall score	**Scores – Principals**	**Scores – Experts in RDE**	**Scores – Teachers**
N	**566**	**158**	**196**	**212**
The selection committees should include representatives of the institution's teaching staff.	0,52	0,49	-0,11	1,14
The selection committees should include representatives of the employers' organizations of school principals.	0,29	0,59	-0,33	0,65
The selection committees should not include representatives of the institution's Public Council.	0,23	0,25	0,18	0,25

The selection committees should include representatives of trade union organizations.	-0,06	-0,48	-0,53	0,69
The selection committees should include more representatives of the local authorities for municipal schools.	-0,06	-0,12	-0,33	0,22
The selection committees should include university lecturers, specialists in educational management.	-0,27	-0,25	-0,77	0,17
The selection committees should include representatives of higher education institutions that train teachers.	-0,35	-0,36	-0,87	0,14
The selection committees should include more than one representative of the Public Council.	-0,43	-0,84	-0,94	0,35

Teachers strongly support the inclusion of a representative of the institution's teaching staff on the selection committee, while principals and experts strongly oppose it.

"*You may end up pressuring the principals later on – I supported you in the selection, now you owe me a favor" (Principal)*

"This creates a sort of 'lobby' for the so-called "internal" candidate or the one the teaching staff endorse/prefer." (RDE expert)

Both principals and experts expressed negative opinions about the participation of academics working in the field of pedagogy and/or educational management in the selection committees, which clearly indicates that *higher education sector is definitely not recognized by the school system management actors as a possible partner in such processes.* Still, some experts in RDE, who have worked with universities on various projects and programs, have a more open view towards such participation, but this type of attitude is rather an exception.

In general, it can be said that *while there are clearly expressed concerns about the participation of representatives of Community councils and sometimes representatives of local authorities in the selection committees, at the moment no key entity has emerged that is acceptable to all and can be seen as a potential full participant.* During the focus groups, several suggestions emerged for including a psychologist or human resources professional on the committee, who is expected to have more experience in conducting selection interviews.

At the same time, *the principals and some of the experts support that the committee should include persons as observers or at least participants with an advisory*

voice to ensure the transparency of the procedure itself, so that it does not become again a closed process to which entities outside of the RDE and the local government do not have access.

Recommendations and attitudes for change in the selection and qualification of principals of educational institutions

In the course of the survey, participants were offered a series of statements regarding changes to key elements of the principal selection process (Table 8).

Table 8. Level of agreement to statements about possible changes in selection procedures and methods

	Overall score	**Scores – Principals**	**Scores – Experts in RDE**	**Scores – Teachers**
N	**566**	**158**	**196**	**212**
The written exam should focus mainly on knowledge of the regulatory framework.	**0,84**	**0,81**	**0,89**	**0,81**
The total number of points required for ranking should be higher.	0,49	0,18	0,53	0,68
Principals should hold the position for a fixed number of years (a mandate), with a new competition for the next mandate.	0,47	-1,08	0,94	1,18
The threshold for admission to the second stage of the competition should be higher.	0,40	-0,09	0,44	0,74
Candidates should not be allowed to apply for the position of "principal" in more than one educational institution.	0,23	0,26	-0,06	0,47

A Master's degree in Educational Management should be a mandatory requirement for holding the position of "principal."	0,12	-0,01	-0,19	0,51
Principals should change the institution they manage after a certain period of time, by going through a competition.	-0,22	-1,32	0,12	0,30
Candidates should not be required to develop a management concept for the institution.	-0,24	0,03	-0,38	-0,31
The test should not be anonymous.	-0,50	-0,68	-0,77	-0,12
Requiring a Master's degree (regardless of the field) is restrictive and should be removed.	-0,55	-0,88	-0,77	-0,11
The threshold for admission to the second stage of the competition should be lower.	-0,79	-0,68	-1,08	-0,59
Candidates should not be required to solve management case studies.	-0,79	-0,89	-1,04	-0,48
Principals should change the institution they manage after a certain period of time without going through a competition.	-0,80	-0,74	-0,90	-0,75
The total number of points required for ranking should be lower.	-0,81	-0,70	-1,03	-0,70

As can be seen, the single statement with which all three groups of participants agreed most strongly was that the written examination should focus primarily on knowledge of the regulations. Similar views were expressed by RDE

experts in the course of the focus groups, with principals being more skeptical about this approach. These views are in substantial contradiction with the statement and expectations from Ministry of Education that during the selection procedure aims at finding managers and leaders who can develop the institution strategically and strive to improve the quality of education. Positive, although much lower (0.49 points), is the assessment of the three groups about the statement that the total number of points for participation in the ranking should be higher.

Of particular interest are several statements on which the views of principals, on the one hand, and experts and teachers, on the other, diverge substantially.

The first one is related to the implementation of mandates for principals. The principals, during the focus groups, strongly expressed their position "against" such kind of reform:

"Why should teachers be on permanent contracts and principals on fixed-term contracts?" (Principal with 20 years of experience). The issue of "tenure" or regular evaluation and/or job change of the principal always evokes a lot of negative emotions among the incumbent principals, despite the available calls among teachers for such measures.

In the context of the quality of management staff and the initial training of principals, opinions differ on the availability of a Master's degree in Educational Management as a requirement for applying for and holding the post of principal. Experts and principals, for the most part, expressed that such a requirement is rather burdensome and will not contribute significantly to preparing future principals to deal with real-life management practice cases. At the same time, current principals, who have been through similar types of master's programs, have a much more positive attitude towards such requirement.

Conclusions

The study highlights the centrality of school principals in shaping the quality and effectiveness of Bulgarian preschool and school education in a context of rapid reforms and rising societal expectations. The introduction of Regulation No. 16 (2022) marked a significant shift from the perception of principals as mere administrators toward their recognition as leaders and strategic managers. The empirical findings from surveys and focus groups with principals, teachers, and regional experts reveal a duality of opinions: *while the new selection mechanisms are generally seen as more transparent, objective, and better aligned with leadership competencies, substantial challenges remain regarding their fairness, consistency, and practical implementation.*

The analysis demonstrates that methods such as interviews and case solving are mostly perceived as adequate for evaluating managerial skills, *yet the defense of development concepts often becomes formalized and vulnerable to*

manipulation. Similarly, the requirement of uniform case studies disregards regional and institutional diversity, limiting the accuracy of assessments. Moreover, concerns about the minimum thresholds and scoring criteria highlight risks of insufficiently prepared candidates entering managerial roles. The composition of the selection committees, particularly the involvement of public council representatives, raises questions of competence, objectivity, and sustainability of the procedure.

Overall, the research indicates that Bulgaria is on the right path in modernizing the selection and qualification of school leaders, but optimization is urgently required. Key improvements include revising evaluation tools to reduce formalism, ensuring regional relevance, enhancing transparency in selection committee structures, and creating a effective mechanism for finding leaders and visioners. Only by achieving such coherence between selection, qualification, and the real challenges of school management can the system secure leaders capable of driving innovation, ensuring equity, and fostering sustainable educational development.

NOTES

1. Law for preschool and school education, State paper, No 79. October 13 2015, last amendment No 64, August 5 2025.
2. Regulation No. 16 on conducting competitions for the position of "principals" in state and municipal institutions in the system of preschool and school education, State paper, No 52. July 5 2022, last amendment No 103, December 12 2023.

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✉ **Dr. Yonka Parvanova, Assoc. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-3627-501X
WoS Researcher ID: AAU-6527-2021

✉ **Dr. Bozhidara Kriviradeva, Assoc. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5715-6159
WoS Researcher ID:AAL-1732-2021

✉ **Mr. Danko Kalapish, PhD student**
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-5851-3552
WoS Researcher ID: IUC-4609-2023

✉ **Mrs. Deyana Milusheva, PhD student**
ORCID iD: 0009-0008-7125-9358
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
Sofia, Bulgaria
E-mail: y.parvanova@fp.uni-sofia.bg
E-mail: b.kriviradeva@fp.uni-sofia.bg
E-mail: danko.ksx@gmail.com
E-mail: d.milusheva@pitagor-school.eu