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**Are primary schools a development  
and stabilisation factor of rural municipalities?  
A study of the differences in their importance  
in the Czech suburban, intermediate and peripheral  
countryside**

**Abstract**

This paper assessed the importance of primary school development in relation to community life, availability of funding, and attractiveness of rural municipalities in the suburban, intermediate and peripheral countryside of the Czech Republic. The importance of primary schools was analysed based on empirical research of the mayors of small municipalities in regions at the NUTS 3 level, i.e. suburban countryside in a large metropolitan area (the Central Bohemia Region), intermediate – stabilised rural region with a low population density (the South Bohemia Region) and predominantly rural region, internal periphery (the Vysocina Region). The results are discussed in three main themes: (1) general importance of schools for municipal development, (2) factors for school maintenance/absence in the village, and (3) development problems of municipalities in particular types of rural regions. Generally, the study findings prove the above division depending on whether there is a school within the municipality, with

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disparities with different types of rural areas not significant. Representatives of rural municipalities with a school confirmed that the school is an important element in terms of community life and the attractiveness of the municipality for current and future residents, whereas in municipalities without schools, the necessary institutional memory to assess the importance and potential of a school was missing. Therefore, schools are only perceived as a provider of education without the possibility to positively influence the life within the municipality. This approach to understanding primary schools in conjunction with trends in rural outmigration in distant rural municipalities enhances the vicious circle of socio-economic shrinkage.

**Keywords:** Primary school, community life, funding, rural region, Czech Republic.

## Introduction

Primary schools in rural areas of the Czech Republic faced significant changes during the second half of the twentieth century, mainly influenced by various political factors (e.g., developing socialism), economic factors (e.g., the transformation of a centrally planned system to a market economy), social factors, and spatial processes, (e.g. suburbanisation) (Majerová, Pavlíková & Maříková 2010). In particular, the resettlement of German-Czech borderlands after the Second World War, collectivisation and associated changes in land ownership and administrative centralisation of the settlement structure influenced, not only the agricultural production system, but also the social climate in the countryside (Bičík & Jančák 2005). Kučerová (2012) noted a significant reduction in the primary school network in connection with the centre settlement system, implemented during the communism period in the 1960s and 1970s with an impact up to 1980s. The political and social development after 1990, especially related to changes in reproductive behaviour, was associated with a relatively significant decrease in the number of babies that were born (Kouřilová & Rousová 2009) as well as the liberalisation of education reflected in the setting and functioning of the educational system.

According to the Czech Statistical Office, the number of primary schools decreased in the whole territory of the Czech Republic (i.e. both urban and rural areas) by almost 1,000 schools between 1995 and 2013. Since 2013,

the number of primary schools has begun to increase, with 4,140 primary schools in the Czech Republic in 2017 (Czech Statistical Office 2018).

In this context, it is noteworthy that municipalities are major founders of primary schools in the Czech Republic. According to the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2018), 87.1 per cent of primary schools are established by municipalities. Furthermore, according to the OECD (2013), the Czech school network is characterised by a large proportion of small schools (54 per cent of those schools have less than 150 pupils), with small schools with composite classes (multileveled schools) often located in small municipalities.

The financing of schools is an important issue, which in the Czech Republic, is divided between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and founders (municipalities). The Ministry provides grants for educational activities (salaries of teachers and other pedagogical staff), teaching aids, textbooks and other educational needs, whereas the founder of a school pays for the operational costs, salaries of non-teaching staff and investment. In the case of a school with an under-the-limit number of pupils, the Ministry can grant an exemption for the school, with the founder (municipality) contributing to the teachers' salaries. It follows that, especially for small municipalities, the school can become a major financial burden (Kučerová, Bláha & Pavlasová 2015; Trnková, Knotová & Chaloupková 2010).

Regarding the existence of rural schools, some authors (see e.g. Miller 1995; Jean 1997; Hargreaves 2009) emphasise that these schools represent a necessary condition for municipal development. However, in the Czech context of numerous municipalities, many have no school yet function over the long term. Are schools really a basic prerequisite for community development and attractiveness of rural municipalities? How do the mayors of small rural municipalities perceive the role of schools? Is the school a priority for them? If there is a school in the municipality, does the municipality have enough funds to finance it? Can small rural schools influence rural areas to make them more resilient to current changes and to meet future challenges? The nexus of these questions is the focus of this paper.

This paper assessed the importance of primary school development in relation to community life, availability of funding and attractiveness of rural municipalities in the Czech suburban, intermediate and peripheral countryside. An empirical survey was conducted based on the views of

small municipalities' mayors in different Czech rural regions (NUTS III), i.e. suburban countryside in a large metropolitan area (the Central Bohemia Region), intermediate – stabilised rural region with low population density (the South Bohemia Region), and predominantly rural region (internal periphery – the Vysocina Region). The survey focused on small municipalities of up to 800 inhabitants as all municipalities above this population level usually establish a primary school.

### Theoretical background

Human resource development is one of the priorities of the EU (EC 2010) and the improved access to education can reduce disparities both between countries and within countries (Checchi 2008). An important task for states is to ensure the availability of education within their territory, therefore, in all developed countries, great attention is given to the importance and accessibility of education in rural areas, as well as in relation to local development, school-community partnerships and their impacts (in the USA e.g. Lyson 2002, Miller 1993, 1995; Bauch 2001; Harmon & Schafft 2009; in Australia e.g. White 2008, Corbett 2009, 2016). In Europe, Ferreira (2011) compared the conditions for the reorganisation of primary school networks in rural areas in Finland, France and Portugal over the last twenty years; according to differences in historical and social contexts in each country, the transfer of good practice can be difficult. The emphasis on rural schools is highlighted in the Nordic countries (see e.g. Hargreaves, Kvalsund & Galton 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson 2009). In the UK, rural school issues have been investigated over the long term (Harrison & Busher 1995; Hargreaves 2009, 2017). In France, Jean (1997) emphasised the link between a school and local identity, and the importance of the school for social relations in the community. In Hungary, Kovács (2012) addressed this issue and focused on the position of the school and its consequences in the ongoing structural changes in Hungarian rural areas.

The liberalisation tendencies in education can have a significant impact on the existence of schools; these occurred in western countries in the second half of the 20th century (see more in Peters 2012, Savage 2018, Wayne Ross & Gibson (eds.) 2006, Karsten 1999). In the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries (refer to, for example, Kascak &

Pupala 2011; Gabriel 2018) liberal approaches emerged during the 1990s and they were also a response to education in a totalitarian regime. During this period, the administrative, economic and pedagogical autonomy of schools was strengthened, with the offer of schools and educational programmes expanded, as well as the development of church and private schools thus providing alternative ways of education (e.g. Waldorf or Montessori schools) and multi-year grammar schools (refer to Strouhal & Štěch 2016). In a situation where the number of pupils decreased due to changes in the reproductive behaviour of the population (Fiala et al. 2018), schools started to compete for pupils. However, this competition was regionally different, reflecting the settlement structure, being more evident in larger settlements and their immediate surroundings (suburban areas). The special focus of the school, its facilities or the offer of leisure activities can then influence the parental choice of the school that the child will attend at the second stage of primary school, i.e. at the age of 11–15 years (Straková and Simonová 2015). This was confirmed by Rieutort (2012) with a focus on the mutual competition of rural and urban schools, and Gueneau (2011) who highlighted changes in parental preferences that affect the existence of rural schools and the mobility of children regarding education.

Most of the aforementioned studies focus not only on schools as educational centres but also on the link to community life and community development. Primary schools are understood not only in their educational role but also in their social and cultural roles (Kučerová 2012). According to Trnková (2009), the school is an important institution for the stabilisation of the community and its development. Some experts emphasise the importance of school-community interactions and the openness and interconnection of the school and community. The school can be called “a community-active” school (Solstad 1997; Sigsworth & Solstad 2005), characterised by its roles as “a provider of varied expanded services within education and care (e.g. kindergarten, a study centre for young people and adults), a local community and service centre, and a centre for developing and sustaining local cultural activities” (Sigsworth & Solstad 2005: 49). Uzzell (1999) noted the school as a “social agent” with the highest degree of school involvement with respect to the community (close and active connection of the school and community). The above authors emphasise the school role in the development of community life, which can contribute

to the attractiveness of municipalities for present and future inhabitants. Trnková (2009) noted that the existence of a school can influence the daily life of the municipality and its demographic structure. Indeed, the availability of kindergartens and primary schools can be considered as a great benefit for people (Lind & Stjernström 2015) and can improve the municipality equipment for facilitating an easier life regarding municipality inhabitants (Elshof et al. 2017). In contrast, some studies show that the influence of the school existence on immigration and outmigration is negligible (e.g. Amcoff 2012, Bakarat 2015; Lind & Stjernström 2015), thereby weakening the role of the school as a development factor.

However, regarding the existence of a school and fulfilment of its educational, social and cultural functions, school funding must be ensured. According to studies by the OECD (2016, 2014, 2017), in most developed countries, local authorities (municipalities) play an important role in ensuring public basic education, with the role of municipalities in school funding varying from country to country. The number of pupils is usually important to keep the school in the municipality; hence the school must be economically sustainable. Due to the depopulation of rural areas, the decreasing number of pupils is becoming the main reason for school closures (Bakarat 2015). In contrast, Ferrier (1996) noted that, according to the view of local politicians, the school closure can be the cause of municipality decline. Hence, there is the question of whether the closure of the school is the cause or the effect of the municipality decline.

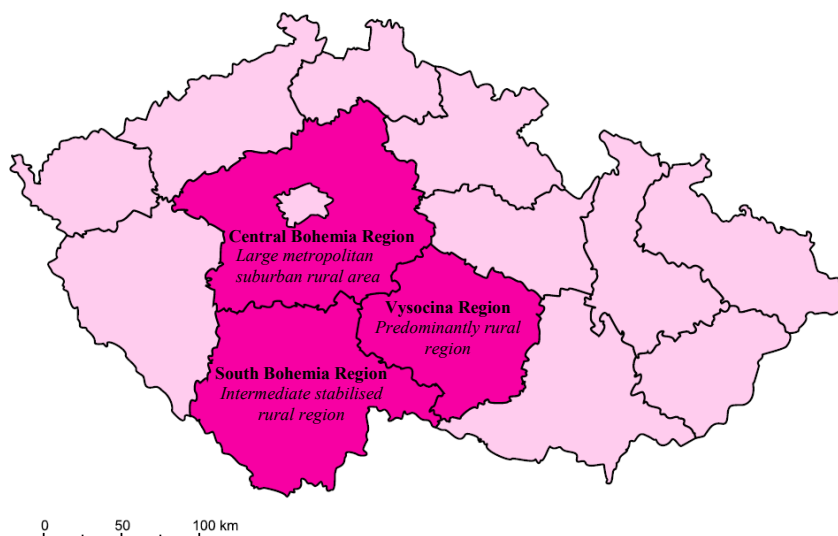
For school maintenance in the municipality, residents and their local political representation have to understand the importance of the school as a certain development factor of the municipality, so be willing to ensure support for the necessary financial costs associated with the existence and functioning of the school.

## Research methodology

The first part of this section describes the three regions under study: the Central Bohemia Region, the South Bohemia Region, and the Vysocina Region. In the second part, the research methods and the different phases of the survey are described, together with the questionnaire and the response rate in all three regions.

## 1. Description of the study area

The Czech Republic represents a territory with six predominantly rural regions (at the NUTS 3 level), six intermediate rural regions, and two predominantly urban regions. A specificity of the territory in the Czech Republic is a highly fragmented settlement structure with a high share of small- and medium-sized towns, which creates good conditions for polycentric development. In the selection of suitable rural regions for analysis, it was also necessary to reflect on the impact of specific trends on spatial development. In recent decades, the importance of suburbanisation has grown in Western European countries (Champion & Brown 2012; Jean & Périgord 2017). In the Czech Republic, the process of suburbanisation began gradually since the late 1990s and continued into the first decade of the new millennium (Ourednicek, Šimon & Kopecna 2015; Šimon 2014). For the present study, these factors were considered, and three regions were selected for the empirical surveys in rural municipalities, according to the main spatial trends which are typical in all European countries (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Selected Czech rural regions in the empirical survey

Source: Own elaboration.

The Central Bohemia Region belongs to a predominantly urban region, but its territory surrounds the capital city of Prague, which means it represents the suburban countryside of a large metropolitan area. This fact affects the environment of the Central Bohemia Region, both economically and socially, and has a significant impact on the development of the settlement structure. The South Bohemia Region is an intermediate stabilised rural region with a low population density, but with a good level of socio-economic development. The Vysocina Region is predominantly a rural region, representing a genuine rural and agricultural area far away from larger cities. It is an internal periphery within the territory of the Czech Republic with a high share of small municipalities (48 per cent of municipalities have up to 200 inhabitants each), and with the highest employment rate in the primary sector (6 per cent in 2016) in the Czech Republic.

The empirical research focused on the general views of mayors regarding the importance of the primary school for municipality development and its role in community life. A survey was carried out in municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants in three different types of regions in 2017 and 2018 of the mayors of the respective municipalities. The limitation of the number of inhabitants was set based on the literature review and specific settlement conditions of the Czech Republic. Czech municipalities with more than 800 inhabitants usually have a primary school, hence there are not enough municipalities without primary schools for a meaningful comparison above this population level.

In 2016, according to the Czech Statistical Office (2017), there were 1,144 municipalities in the Central Bohemia Region (71 per cent of them having up to 800 inhabitants per municipality), 624 municipalities in the South Bohemia Region (76.3 per cent of them having up to 800 inhabitants per municipality), and 704 municipalities in the Vysocina Region (85.8 per cent of them having up to 800 inhabitants per municipality). The highest portion of rural municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants with primary schools is in the Vysocina peripheral rural region (17.5 per cent, i.e. 106), which shows that these municipalities are outside of the main spatial trends, therefore, they need to build their attractiveness autonomously. The Central Bohemia Region, as a suburban region, represents 14 per cent (i.e. 114) of municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants which have a primary school, with the South Bohemia Region having the lowest proportion of municipalities



with a primary school (only 12.6 per cent, i.e. 60). The distribution of schools by size category of municipalities is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants in selected regions, 2016*

Region	Total number of municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants	Municipalities with a school		Municipalities without a school	
		number	% of total number of municipalities	number	% of total number of municipalities
Central Bohemia	809	114	14.1	695	85.9
South Bohemia	499	60	12.0	439	88.0
Vysocina	611	106	17.3	505	82.7

Source: Own table using data of the Czech Statistical Office and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

## 2. Methods

The empirical survey was divided into two phases. In the first phase, all mayors of municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants each and with a primary school were surveyed in October and November 2017. The return rate on questionnaires was 55.3 per cent in the Central Bohemia Region (63 out of 114 mayors addressed), 55.8 per cent in the Vysocina Region (59 out of 106 addressed) and 46.7 per cent in the South Bohemia Region (28 out of 60 addressed) (see Table 2). The overall return rate was 53.6 per cent and all municipal size categories up to 800 inhabitants were proportionally involved in the final set of completed questionnaires, therefore, the results of the empirical research can be considered as sufficiently representative.

In the second phase, the survey focused on the mayors of municipalities without schools in March and April 2018. In this survey, the group of addressed municipalities was limited to a group size of municipalities with 301–800 inhabitants each; small municipalities with up to 300 inhabitants each were not addressed because these municipalities established a primary school in exceptional cases. In the second phase of the survey, 321 mayors

were approached in the Central Bohemia Region; 143 mayors completed a questionnaire (i.e. 44.5 per cent of questionnaires were returned completed). In the South Bohemia Region, 113 municipalities were addressed, out of which there were 52 respondents (i.e. 46.0 per cent of questionnaires were returned completed). In the Vysocina Region, 32 mayors from a total of 75 respondents answered the questionnaire. The return on the completed questionnaires was almost 42.7 per cent and this was the lowest of all three regions. The overall return rate was 44.4 per cent and mayors who completed a questionnaire represented proportionally all size groups of municipalities (301–800 inhabitants) in all three regions. This representative sample also included a sufficient number of municipalities with which to interpret the situation in selected rural regions.

**Table 2.** *Data on the return rate by municipalities with/without a school*

Region	Municipalities with a school			Municipalities without a school		
	number of municipalities	number of questionnaires	return rate (%)	number of municipalities	number of questionnaires	return rate (%)
Central Bohemia	114	63	55.3	321	143	44.5
South Bohemia	60	28	46.7	113	52	46.0
Vysocina	106	59	55.7	75	32	42.7

Source: Results of own survey, 2018.

The questionnaire for mayors of municipalities with a school was divided into three sections and comprised twenty questions. The first section concerns identification and descriptive background questions about the municipality (i.e. population, services available in the municipality, jobs existing in the municipality, commuting to/from work, and the most important shortcomings of the municipality). The second section focused on community life (i.e. cultural and social activities, societies in the municipality, and development activities), with the third section regarding the school role in the appropriate municipality (i.e. context and

development in the number of pupils, school role in the community life, economic issues of schools).

The questionnaire for mayors of municipalities without a school included three sections with seventeen questions. The first section contains identification and descriptive background questions about the municipality (i.e. the same questions as in the previous questionnaire). The second section focused on historical aspects of the non-existence of a school in appropriate municipalities and expected future development of a school, while the third section contained questions regarding the perception of the possible role of schools in community life, their relation to the municipality attractiveness, and their relation to the development problems of the municipality.

In both questionnaires, besides direct answers, the Likert scale was used, with respondents asked to choose from answers of “definitely yes”, “rather yes”, “rather not”, “definitely not”, “I cannot assess”. Moreover, the third part included an assessment on the scale of 1–5 (1-the best, 5-the worst) for questions related to economic aspects. For some questions, respondents could choose from the offered options, alternatively adding their view.

## **Results and discussion**

This part of the paper summarises and discusses the results of an empirical survey of mayors of small municipalities in three selected regions and is divided into three parts according to key themes: perception of the general importance of a school for the municipal development, factors for school maintenance/absence in the village, and development problems of municipalities in particular types of rural regions. The most important results of the empirical research are given in Annex 1 and Annex 2.

### **1. Perception of the general importance of school for the municipal development**

Responses to the question about the general importance of a school for municipal development depend on whether the school is in the municipality.

In all three regions, all mayors of municipalities with a school understood that the school was an essential element for the municipal development, and they did not consider the closure of the school. In all regions, the mayors were most afraid of reducing the attractiveness of their municipality for new residents. Furthermore, in the South Bohemia Region (intermediate stabilised rural region) and the Vysocina Region (predominantly rural region), this concern was accompanied by a fear of an increase in outmigration. In the Central Bohemia Region (suburban countryside), these respondents are mayors of municipalities that are located in close proximity to the capital city of Prague.

The mayors of municipalities with a school are aware of the importance of maintaining the school, both for the municipal attractiveness for current and new residents, as well as for social aspects (creation of social ties between schoolmates and other members of the rural community, local patriotism, development of community life). This means that the main importance of the school in the municipality lies in its demographic stabilisation, which was confirmed by the fact that only 8 per cent of respondents in all three regions expect that nothing would change after closing a school. In the case of suburban rural areas, the mutual territorial competition of municipalities is greater, therefore, mayors also sensitively perceived other aspects of the potential of a school for the development of their municipality.

Most mayors of municipalities without a school in all three regions did not perceive the school as an important element of development, however, there were some differences among selected rural regions. In the Central Bohemia Region (suburban countryside), where there had been schools in the past, in about 70 per cent of 143 municipalities, which completed the questionnaire, nevertheless, only a quarter of respondents considered a school to be important for the municipality. Most mayors (81.3 per cent) referred to the parental preferences of an urban school coupled with parental commuting to work, therefore, they did not perceive the necessity for a school. Only 8.4 per cent of respondents answered positively about the renewal of the school, although 44 per cent of the municipalities are establishing a kindergarten. In the South Bohemian Region (intermediate stabilised rural region), 80.8 per cent of the municipalities had a primary school in the past, and most schools (about 60 per cent) ceased to exist from 1970 to 1990. Although 44.2 per cent of municipalities run a kindergarten,

only 30.7 per cent of the respondents confirmed the positive role of a school as a development factor of the municipality, and 5.8 per cent of respondents considered renewing a school. Similarly, in the Vysocina Region (predominantly rural region), 84.8 per cent of the municipalities had a primary school in the past, with most schools (about 63 per cent) closing from 1970 to 1990 during the administrative centralisation process of the communism period. The school as a factor of municipal development was positively assessed by 37.5 per cent of respondents. Notwithstanding, all respondents from the Vysocina Region did not consider a renewal of the school due to the lack of school-aged children (47 per cent) or to a parental choice to take children to a school in the nearest town (43.8 per cent). It is evident that there is an emphasis on the importance of the kindergarten in the village, as maintained by 72 per cent of municipalities. The results of the survey show the low or very low motivation of representatives of local governments and, in part, the opting out of considering the renewal of this development element in their village (only 6.6 per cent of all respondents). These mayors argued that the primary school was closed a long time ago, so people have become accustomed to commuting to the nearest school in another village, town, or city. This relates to the familiarity of mayors with the preferences of parents (see e.g. Gueneau 2011; Straková & Simonová 2015; Simonová 2017) and requirements for funds from the municipal budget.

Mayors of all three regions who agreed with the positive role of the school perceived the social aspect as the most important potential benefit. In the Vysocina Region, respondents emphasised the importance of the school concerning reducing outmigration. Most mayors of rural municipalities without a primary school, especially in the Vysocina Region and South Bohemia, rejected the importance of the school for the development of economic activities.

Both groups of mayors (with or without school) envisaged a positive role of the school concerning population stabilisation. When comparing the situation in the demographic development in municipalities with and without primary schools (see Table 3), the differences among the traits of the three selected rural regions were more apparent. The Central Bohemia Region represents the catchment area of the metropolitan city of Prague, therefore, many municipalities are characterised by a strong suburbanisation process (i.e. a high rate of net migration) coupled with

a high rate of natural increase in population. In contrast, the Vysocina Region and the South Bohemia Region include less attractive and less populated peripheral areas with very small municipalities. However, it should be emphasised that the Czech Republic is characterised not only by its fragmented settlement structure but also by a large number of small- and medium-sized towns within the European countries. Therefore, a positive migration balance can also be observed in rural municipalities without schools, as suburban processes are identifiable in rural municipalities that are close to small- and medium-sized towns. However, rural municipalities that are located in the inner periphery of the state tend to depopulate.

**Table 3.** *Natural increase and migration balance in surveyed municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants – average for 2011–2017*

region	Municipalities with a school		Municipalities without a school	
	Natural increase per 1000 inh.	Net migration per 1000 inh.	Natural increase per 1000 inh.	Net migration per 1000 inh.
Central Bohemia	0.44	7.05	0.82	11.75
South Bohemia	-0.42	1.58	-0.59	5.62
Vysocina	0.36	1.83	-0.72	3.65

Source: Own table using data of the Czech Statistical Office.

In both regions, the net migration of municipalities without a school is several times higher than those municipalities with a school. Thus, it is possible to agree with studies in the literature that are based on other countries, that the existence of the school is probably only a very marginal reason for migration into the area (Amcoff 2012; Bakarat 2015; Lind & Stjernström 2015).

Both groups of mayors (with a school and without a school) perceived problems associated with demographic developments in rural communities. At the same time, the mayors reflected the preferences of parents who, because of their commuting (by car or public transport), can take their children to better-equipped town/city schools (for further information, refer to Marada & Kvétoň 2010).

## **2. Factors for school maintenance/absence in the village**

In the case of municipalities with schools, there were also very small inter-regional differences in reasons for maintaining the school in a municipality, with mayors considering it as important to ensure both the school facilities and the necessary costs for school operation and maintenance. In all three regions, the mayors assessed the state of the school building as relatively good (with average rating 2.1 to 2.4 on a scale of 1–5, 1 – the best, 5 – the worst). While municipalities repaired or rebuilt the school building in the last 10 years, above all within the LEADER programme (i.e. the specific measure of the EU Rural Policy), most of those municipalities plan to continue to improve educational conditions and to modernise the school building and equipment. According to the results of this survey, most municipalities in all three regions do not have problems with ensuring operational cost for schools (with average rating 1.7 to 1.8 on a scale of 1–5, 1 – the best, 5 – the worst). In relation to the decrease in children, the mayors noted problems regarding ensuring school operational costs, with 6.5 per cent of respondents in the Central Bohemia Region (suburban countryside) and 4.9 per cent in the Vysocina Region rated very negatively the availability of funding (i.e. rating 4 to 5). In the case of the South Bohemian Region (a medium-stabilised rural region), the mayors were not particularly negative about the availability of funding for operating costs. Regarding investment, there was more availability of funding in the Central Bohemia Region (about 56 per cent of mayors scored 1 on the scale of 1–5, 1 – the best, 5 – the worst) with an average assessment of 1.7, with the least availability of funding in the Vysocina Region with an average assessment of 2.1. In summary, funding is not a basic problem for school maintenance. Moreover, the empirical survey shows that in small municipalities facing a decrease in the number of school children, the mayors are aiming to keep the school ‘almost at any cost’ (see Kučerová 2012; Ferrier 1996), even if the school has an under-the-limit number of pupils. This implies that municipalities want to maintain schools and they can allocate the necessary funds.

In this section of the questionnaire, mayors of municipalities without a school answered questions according to the context of school absence. As mentioned above, only a small group of mayors considered renewing

the school. In all three regions, the most frequent responses were “no suitable building”, “lack of children”, and “children commute to the nearest town/city school”. The lack of finance was noted as a problem only in the fourth place. Most mayors understood the school solely as a provider of education and they did not recognise other benefits of the school, above all, in relation to the social and cultural development of the community. Schools were closed many years ago (about 40 years and more) and mayors and residents did not have the necessary “institutional memory” regarding the potential benefits of the school existence in the municipality. The results of the survey show the low motivation or resignation of representatives of local governments considering the renewal of the school.

### **3. Development problems of municipalities in particular types of rural regions**

In the third section of the survey, attention was focused on the development problems of municipalities and identification of their differences, especially the issue of job opportunities, quality of infrastructure, services, public transport and cultural activities.

In all three regions and both types of municipality (with or without a school), a lack of jobs was identified as the most important development problem. In the Central Bohemia Region (suburban countryside), 55.6 per cent of the mayors of municipalities with a school, but only 40.6 per cent of mayors without a school, considered this problem as the most important. The most significant difference regarding the lack of jobs was found in the views of the mayors in the South Bohemia Region (intermediate stabilised rural region) – 75 per cent of the mayors with a school and 44.2 per cent of the mayors without a school. In the Vysocina Region (predominantly rural region), regarding the lack of jobs, both groups of mayors assessed this problem similarly (52.5 per cent of mayors with a school; 56.3 per cent of mayors without a school). The lower rating of the importance of job opportunities in municipalities without schools in the Central Bohemia Region and the South Bohemia Region represents a paradox and an opting out of any activity to improve the conditions of the local labour market development.



For both groups of mayors in the Central Bohemia Region, the insufficient infrastructure is a very urgent problem with respect to the intensive suburbanisation process in the Prague metropolitan catchment area. Insufficient infrastructure was also noted as the second key problem by the mayors without a school in the Vysocina Region (31.3 per cent of respondents), but there was a significant difference in the views of the mayors with a school (22 per cent of respondents) who reported insufficient public transport as the second most important problem. Generally, insufficient public transport is more emphasised by the mayors of municipalities with a school, with certain differences among regions – e.g. in the Central Bohemia Region, there is better availability of public transport than in other regions. The differences between the views of the mayors with a school and without a school can be seen in an issue regarding the grocery shop, which was a relatively less significant problem in municipalities with a school than in municipalities without a school. There are large differences in the question of a lack of services, both among regions and between municipalities, with or without a school.

The mayors of municipalities without a school could choose the absence of the school as a development problem. According to the above results, the level of perception of this problem is low but significantly different among regions, being highest in the South Bohemian Region (17.3 per cent of respondents), followed by the Central Bohemian Region (11.2 per cent of respondents), and the Vysocina Region (only 6.3 per cent of respondents). From the perspective of municipalities without schools, the major development problems are mainly the lack of jobs, insufficient technical infrastructure, and the need to ensure public transport.

Overall, it can be concluded that if a municipality has a school, it aims to keep that school at all costs, while resolving other development problems. However, if the municipality does not have a school, its representatives do not feel the need to renew the school in any way, rather they are focused on solving other developmental problems related to job opportunities, technical infrastructure, and transport services of the locality.

A review of the literature shows the important role of the primary school in small municipalities within rural areas. Schools are understood not only as educational centres but, more broadly, as centres that positively influence community life and are one of the basic prerequisites for municipality development (for example, see Miller 1995; Yves 1997; Gueneau 2011;

Kučerová 2012). This finding is closely related to institutional memory (i.e. awareness of the school's existence and its benefits) and, logically, also to territorial differentiation of demographic potential, i.e. municipalities in the suburban countryside have a greater need to set up and maintain the school compared to other types of rural areas. Regarding the survey findings: 1) it is possible to agree with those authors who emphasise the school availability as an advantage (Lind & Stjernström 2015; Elshof et al. 2017) but in our opinion 2) a school is not a necessary prerequisite for the municipality stabilisation and development.

## Conclusion

The importance of the primary school in rural municipalities is perceived by many authors, not only as a centre of education but also as a centre of the broader community life (Ferrier 1996; White 2008; Corbett 2009; Hargreaves, Kvalsund & Galton 2009; Kovács 2012) with the potential to contribute to municipality development. Other authors emphasise the school as an advantage, but not a necessity, in that the school presence only minimally influences the municipality attractiveness (Amcoff 2012; Bakarar 2015; Lind & Stjernström 2015). For this reason, this paper focused on the importance of the primary school as a basic developmental prerequisite for small rural municipalities. The survey respondents were the mayors of municipalities with up to 800 inhabitants in the suburban, intermediate and peripheral countryside of the Czech Republic and focused on three key themes: 1) perception of the general importance of the school for municipal development, 2) factors for school maintenance/absence in the village, and 3) development problems of municipalities in particular types of rural regions.

The survey findings revealed certain interregional differences in the perception of the school as a development factor of the municipality. Nevertheless, the personal experiences of the mayors regarding the existence of the school and its function have a major influence on the perception of the school. The mayors of rural municipalities with a school confirm the wider socio-economic importance of the school for the stabilisation and development of the municipality. In contrast, in municipalities without a school, the mayors lack personal long term experiences and institutional

memories, therefore, they understand the importance of schools only in a restricted way, especially in connection with the educational function of schools.

Factors of school maintenance in the village are closely linked to the number of school children, which is a significant problem, especially in the intermediate and peripheral countryside. As a risk to the future of the existence of a school, the mayors in all regions perceive the commuting of parents, with parents choosing better-equipped town schools for the education of their children. School funding was not confirmed as a principal problem in all regions.

The factors influencing the absence of the school in the municipality are closely linked with the perception of their importance by the mayors, even if municipalities have a kindergarten, i.e. they have future schoolchildren, they do not consider renewal/establishment of a school which could help to reduce commuting of small children. Those mayors argue in favour of commuting parents who take their children to better-equipped municipal schools. The research shows, that due to positive demographic trends, a small group of mayors in the suburban countryside tend to consider school renewal/establishment in the future.

In all municipalities, mayors solve traditional development problems, such as a lack of job opportunities, insufficient infrastructure, insufficient public transport, etc; the school was not included in major development problems. In the municipalities with a school, no significant problems related to the school functioning and financing were identified, in that schools are an integral part of municipal life. In municipalities without a school, the mayors perceive the above problems as essential, in that the absence of a school is not one of these problems. A higher level of perception of the absence of a school as a shortcoming was evident in the intermediate countryside.

Hence, are primary schools a development and stabilisation factor of rural municipalities? The results of this survey indicate that the school cannot be considered as a key factor of the municipality attractiveness and community development in the Czech Republic. In the case of suburban rural areas, the existence of a school can be a certain competitive advantage for selective immigration, i.e. for young families with children. Although the research did not confirm the school as a key factor of municipal development, small rural schools positively contribute to community life, especially in

terms of social relations among all generations, the development of cultural activities, the use of the school as a centre for adult education, premises of social activities, and others, thereby they contribute to strengthening the community. Furthermore, strong cohesive communities make rural areas more resilient to negative changes.

Future research needs to address the most detailed analysis of the aforementioned results, focussing on the distant rural municipalities that are facing a vicious circle of socio-economic shrinkage. What other factors influence the views of the mayors regarding the importance of the primary school? Are those mayors able to recognise possibilities/opportunities related to a school, e.g. schools as centres for educational and training activities within lifelong learning? What is the key issue of municipalities related to schools? Is it an economic, demographic or social situation in the municipality? Do parents want a school in their municipality, or do they prefer commuting their children to a better-equipped town school? In the future, parents and other residents of small rural municipalities should also be included in such research to define how they understand this issue and whether, and to what extent, small rural schools can fulfil their ideas and demands.

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**Annex 1. Views of mayors of municipalities with a school**

<b>General importance of school existence for municipal development</b>						
<b>The school importance in % of respondents</b>	<b>Definitely yes</b>	<b>Rather yes</b>	<b>Rather not</b>	<b>Definitely not</b>	<b>I cannot assess this</b>	
Central Bohemia (n=63)	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
South Bohemia (n=27)	96.3	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Vysocina (n=59)	96.6	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>The school closure in % of respondents</b>						
	<b>yes</b>	<b>not</b>				
Central Bohemia (n=63)	0.0	100.0				
South Bohemia (n=28)	3.6	96.4				
Vysocina (n=59)	0.0	100.0				
<b>Impacts of the potential school closure in % (respondents could choose more reasons)</b>						
	<b>Higher emigration</b>	<b>No new residents</b>	<b>Decline of economic activities in the village</b>	<b>No change</b>		
Central Bohemia (n=62)	22.6	74.2	35.5	8.1		
South Bohemia (n=26)	46.2	73.1	38.5	7.7		
Vysocina (n=59)	28.8	71.2	20.3	8.5		
<b>Factors for school maintenance in the village (1-the best, 5-the worst)</b>						
<b>Scale assessment</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>average assessment</b>
<b>State of school building in % of respondents</b>						
Central Bohemia (n=62)	29.0	37.1	25.8	8.1	0.0	2.1

**Annex 1. Views of mayors of municipalities with a school**

Factors for school maintenance in the village (1-the best, 5-the worst)						
Scale assessment	1	2	3	4	5	average assessment
<b>State of school building in % of respondents</b>						
South Bohemia (n=26)	34.6	19.2	26.9	11.5	7.7	2.4
Vysocina (n=59)	27.1	39.0	23.7	8.5	1.7	2.2
<b>Operational costs – availability of funding in % of respondents</b>						
Central Bohemia (n=61)	42.6	39.3	11.5	4.9	1.6	1.8
South Bohemia (n=26)	45.2	38.5	15.4	0.0	0.0	1.7
Vysocina (n=59)	37.7	41.0	9.8	4.9	0.0	1.8
<b>Investment – availability of funding in % of respondents</b>						
Central Bohemia (n=59)	55.9	23.7	25.3	5.1	0.0	1.7
South Bohemia (n=25)	36.0	44.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	1.8
Vysocina (n=59)	31.0	37.9	24.1	6.9	0.0	2.1
<b>Development problems of the municipalities in % (respondents could choose more reasons)</b>						
	Lack of jobs	Insufficient infrastructure	Insufficient public transport	Grocery shop (lack of goods, high prices, absence)	Lack of services	Lack of cultural activities
Central Bohemia (n=63)	55.6	33.3	20.6	14.3	20.6	14.3
South Bohemia (n=28)	75.0	28.6	35.7	10.7	32.1	14.3
Vysocina (n=59)	52.5	22.0	28.8	18.6	20.3	10.2

Source: Results of own survey, 2018.

**Annex 2. Views of mayors in municipalities without a school**

Perception of the general importance of possible existence of a school for municipal development						
The school importance in %	Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather not	Definitely not	I cannot assess	
Central Bohemia (n=141)	14.9	10.6	41.8	22.0	10.6	
South Bohemia (n=52)	15.4	15.4	32.7	25.0	11.5	
Vysocina (n=32)	25.0	12.5	34.4	21.9	6.3	
<b>Establishment / renewal of the school in the municipality in % of respondents</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>no</b>				
Central Bohemia (n=143)	8.4	91.6				
South Bohemia (n=52)	5.8	94.2				
Vysocina (n=32)	0.0	100.0				
<b>Perception of potential benefits of the existence of a school – the most frequent reasons for having a school in % (respondents could choose more reasons)</b>	<b>Reducing outmigration</b>	<b>Development of economic activities</b>	<b>Stronger identification of residents with the municipality</b>	<b>Greater involvement of residents in community activities</b>	<b>Sufficiently suitable space for activities of local associations</b>	
Central Bohemia (n=36)	25.0	44.4	61.1	47.2	22.2	
South Bohemia (n=16)	31.3	25.0	56.3	31.3	25.0	
Vysocina (n=12)	50.0	8.3	50.0	50.0	8.3	

**Annex 2. Views of mayors in municipalities without a school**

Reasons for the absence of a school in the village in % (respondents could choose more reasons)							
	No suitable building	Lack of municipality funds	Lack of children	No demand for the school establishment/renewal	Children commute to the nearest city schools		
Central Bohemia (n=131)	55.7	39.7	52.7	19.1	43.5		
South Bohemia (n=49)	49.0	34.7	36.7	24.5	40.8		
Vysocina (n=32)	40.6	28.1	46.9	25.0	43.8		
Development problems of the municipalities in % (respondents could choose more reasons)							
	Lack of jobs	Insufficient infrastructure	Insufficient public transport	Grocery shop (lack of goods, high prices, absence)	Lack of services	Lack of cultural activities	Absence of a school
Central Bohemia (n=143)	40.6	39.2	14.7	28.0	22.4	11.9	11.2
South Bohemia (n=52)	44.2	25.0	23.1	30.8	13.5	15.4	17.3
Vysocina (n=32)	56.3	31.3	25.0	28.1	12.5	12.5	6.3

Source: Results of own survey, 2018.