



**HAL**  
open science

## School Reform: Innovation and the Rhetoric of Change

Carlo Barone, Gianluca Argentin

► **To cite this version:**

Carlo Barone, Gianluca Argentin. School Reform: Innovation and the Rhetoric of Change. Italian Politics, 2016, 31, pp.135 - 154. 10.3167/ip.2016.310109 . hal-03579762

**HAL Id: hal-03579762**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03579762>**

Submitted on 18 Feb 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# SCHOOL REFORM

## Innovation and the Rhetoric of Change

*Gianluca Argentin and Carlo Barone*

In July 2015, the so-called Good School reform bill, which introduces many noteworthy changes in the Italian school system, was passed. After outlining the trajectory of the reform in the first section of this chapter, for reasons of space we will limit ourselves to a discussion of the main areas of intervention: the governance of the schools (in the second and third sections), the special plan for hiring teachers (the fourth section), and the strengthening of the humanistic curriculum and of the links between the schools and the labor market (the fifth section). While awaiting the delegated decrees and the implementing regulations, we will provide a provisional assessment of the reform in the concluding section.

The Good School reform follows a meritocratic model of governance and is characterized by a strong role for school principals. Such a model stands in sharp contrast to the political culture of the center-left, which has led to pronounced conflict within the center-left itself as well as between the governing majority and the opposition. However, when looking at the problems of implementation, the innovative scope of the reform would appear to be more modest. This suggests that, apart from reforming the schools, an important political issue at stake is the ideological positioning of the Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party) in the central question of the governance of the public sector and in its relations with the trade unions.



## The Trajectory of the Reform

On 9 July 2015, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi tweeted: “One hundred thousand new jobs, more meritocracy, more autonomy. #labuonascuola has become law” (Riccardi 2015). This statement summed up the reform that had been approved that same day by the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>1</sup> The trajectory leading up to the parliamentary approval of this reform can be divided into three phases. The first phase involved the circulation of a programmatic document in September 2014 that was drafted on short notice by a small group of experts at the Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research (MIUR) earlier that summer. Renzi launched the document by means of a video message in which the minister of education, Stefania Giannini, did not appear and was not even mentioned. In this video, Renzi addressed himself directly to the citizens and to the teachers, presenting key themes with rather empathic slogans (e.g., “I propose to you a pact on education, not the umpteenth reform, not the usual discourse that all politicians propose”).<sup>2</sup> Published online, the document clearly outlined the objectives of the reform and its main policy measures, two of which were especially emphasized. The first was the special plan for hiring teachers, with the ambitious goal of “putting an end once and for all to the long-standing issue of precarious jobs in the Italian schools.”<sup>3</sup> The second called for the creation of autonomy teams in each school, that is, groups of teaching staff members who would be mainly dedicated to enriching the curriculum. The other noteworthy changes were the proposal to strengthen the role of school principals in appointing and assessing teachers and the suggestion to replace seniority-based wage increases with performance bonuses. Although the initial reform project was passed in a largely unaltered form, it nevertheless had a rather bumpy ride.

The second phase of this reform process consisted of an online consultation of pupils, parents, teachers, and principals on the programmatic document. This consultation lasted from September to November 2014 and, according to the data provided by the government on its official site, involved 207,000 participants. This phase marked a clear break with the past, not only because of the unprecedented decision to rely on a large-scale online consultation of those involved in the education system, but also because this process came to replace *de facto* the traditional consultations with the trade unions. The government sought support for the reform directly within the education system while skipping the intermediation of the trade unions, who now found themselves sidestepped and marginalized.

The third phase began with the presentation on 27 March 2015 of a draft law, which was followed by a parliamentary procedure of about

three months. Overall, opposition to the act from the side of the minority parties was mild. The Lega Nord (LN, Northern League) raised some issues and proposed some amendments concerning marginal aspects (the need for better involvement of the local authorities, references to an alleged “gender theory”). Forza Italia even made enthusiastic comments, such as those of Mariastella Gelmini, ex-minister of education: “Words such as merit, career progression of the teachers, assessment, bonuses, links between schools and the private sector, reform of the collegial bodies, have been put in the spotlight by the center-right. Now Renzi takes care of putting them into practice.”<sup>4</sup> The Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement) insisted on a stronger involvement of Parliament and criticized the tax breaks for private schools as well as the reduction in the number of new appointments, which went from 150,000 in the programmatic document of September 2014 to only 100,000 in the text debated in the Chamber of Deputies (Vendemmiale 2015).

The most determined opposition was mounted by the trade unions and the minority within the PD. On 5 May 2015, a widely adhered to school strike was called, followed by the obstruction of the final grading session and the boycott of the INVALSI tests.<sup>5</sup> On the occasion of the strike, Giuseppe Civati, at that point a member of the minority within the PD, stated that “the PD has betrayed its electoral commitments and has produced a school reform far removed from our political culture,” while Stefano Fassina, referring to the new role of the school principals, argued that “schools cannot be barracks with commanding officers.”<sup>6</sup> This aspect, together with the introduction of merit-based remuneration for the teachers, has been the point of most friction with the PD minority and the trade unions. These elements represent a clear break with the positions previously held by the PD, which favored the uniform remuneration of teachers and gave primacy to collegial bodies. The day after the strike, Renzi replied to his critics with a new video message in which he set out and defended the main points of the reform, pointing to the major investment his government was making in the school system. The prime minister thus confirmed his personal engagement with this reform, while Minister of Education Giannini was only marginally visible during the process. In fact, the entire procedure was handled by a small staff of experts who answered directly to Renzi and to his policy adviser Davide Faraone, undersecretary of education.

The political gamble Renzi’s government was making had been clear since the document of September 2014. The new manager-principal role and merit-based remuneration would be rendered more palatable by the special plan for hiring those on precarious contracts (an issue traditionally close to the heart of the teachers’ unions) and by the

significant increase (124 million euros) in the regular funding for the schools. However, between May and June 2015 the act became stalled, as it was confronted with strong and broad-based opposition from within the education system and from the trade unions.

Renzi's strategy to ensure the final passage of the bill rested on three decisions. The first was to initially make the implementation of the special plan for hiring teachers for the 2015–2016 academic year conditional upon the approval of the reform in its entirety, thus saddling Parliament with the responsibility for any possible delays in hiring teachers. The second decision was to collect in a mega-amendment some points raised by the minority of the PD, such as the criteria to be applied in the hiring of teachers and the composition of the committee for the assessment of teachers' performances that was to be established in each school. The third decision was to table a vote of confidence in the Senate on the mega-amendment. The bill was passed, first by the Senate on 25 June 2015 and subsequently by the Chamber of Deputies, with 277 votes in favor, 173 against, and 4 abstentions. The Democratic Party, Area Popolare (AP, Popular Area), and Scelta Civica (SC, Civic Choice) voted in favor. Among the minority of the PD, five opposing votes and 25 absences were counted, including those of well-known members such as Pier Luigi Bersani and Rosy Bindi. The text, a single article with over 200 paragraphs (not characterized by paramount clarity), leaves ample room for further specification of the subsequent implementing decrees that are to be issued in the 18 months following the approval of the law.

Overall, the passage of the reform confirmed some characteristic traits of the political approach of Renzi's government. In terms of methods, the strong media exposure of the prime minister, his innovative use of a large-scale online consultation, the search for a direct connection with the electorate, and his hostility toward mediation with the trade unions and with the minority of the PD represent a marked discontinuity with respect to the traditional *modus operandi* of the center-left, which has always prioritized consultation with the trade unions. Moreover, the decision to appeal directly to the voters with a video is clearly reminiscent of Silvio Berlusconi's means of communicating. In terms of content, the reform has marked a break with some core principles of the center-left, that is, the primacy of the collegial bodies, the uniformity of the remuneration of the teachers, and the use of bureaucratic appointment procedures (rankings and competitive examinations). Also, this case displays an encompassing vision of the governance of public sector employment (see Di Mascio and Natalini, this volume), inspired by a meritocratic model that is profoundly foreign to the traditional political culture of the center-left.

## **The Governance of the Education System: School Autonomy and Stronger Principals**

Article 1 of the law opens with a clear statement: in order to achieve the fundamental objectives of the education system, “the current law gives full weight to the autonomy of the educational institutions.” The Good School reform explicitly aims to conclude the process initiated by the center-left with the reform of school autonomy in 1997, a reform referred to in Article 1. The increased autonomy of the schools had served to weaken the traditionally centralist framework of the Italian school system by awarding significant room for maneuver to the individual institutions in terms of defining their curriculum, determining their own organizational framework, and managing their relations with the surrounding area. At the same time, the 1997 reform left the central level in control of career advancement according to seniority and of the recruitment of teachers by means of rankings and nationwide competitive examinations. Also, in terms of their budget, the schools were granted only limited room for maneuver. Hence, with respect to the two central levels concerning the management of human and financial resources, the autonomy of the schools had made little progress.

With the Good School reform, Renzi’s government claims to have completed this process. As far as financial autonomy is concerned, the reform aims to stimulate donations to the schools, providing for a tax deduction of 65 percent of the donations made. This is the so-called school bonus, which is available to private parties (e.g., the families of pupils), companies, and non-profit organizations. It should be noted that today’s families already contribute to the budget of the schools with a voluntary contribution toward the enrollment of the pupils. In order to reduce the risk that parties external to the schools would be able to exert influence by making generous donations, a ceiling of 100,000 euros has been imposed. Nevertheless, a donation of even 10,000 euros would have a significant impact on the budget of a single school, given its financial condition. A second objection concerns the varying ability of schools to attract external funding. Schools located in well-to-do areas and whose parents come from a wealthier social background will be able to count on more abundant donations. This might reinforce the existing disparities, with some schools abundantly funded and others less endowed with financial resources. In order to contain such risks, 10 percent of the total donations will be reallocated in favor of schools that have received less funding, a modest redistribution overall. If it is to be successful, this measure should nevertheless guarantee more budget autonomy to the schools.

The reform combines the growing autonomy in the management of the schools' resources with autonomy in defining the curriculum. The first step in this direction is an effort to enhance the plan of the educational activities (POF, *piano dell'offerta formativa*) that each school drafts. The POF will now become a three-year plan that represents the "fundamental constitutive document of the cultural and operational identity of the educational institutions and specifies the curricular, extracurricular, educational, and organizational design that each school adopts in the framework of its autonomy" (Art. 5). Above all, it is the starting point for the assessment of the school principal and thus may potentially become more binding than is the case today. The plan must enumerate a set of educational objectives that can be achieved during the course of the three years, establish the curricular and extra-curricular activities necessary to achieve those objectives, and identify the human and financial resources to be employed to that end. This form of medium-term planning with specifically earmarked resources is rather new for the Italian schools, even though there is a risk that in practice the "new" three-year plans will copy the "old" POFs.

The second step is the creation of teams dedicated to giving content to the educational autonomy of the schools, that is, groups of teachers who are primarily charged with carrying out the three-year plan of educational activities. Hence, those teachers may be employed for curricular activities or substitutions, but also for projects to improve and upgrade the services that each school decides to develop (e.g., activities to reduce the dropout rate or to promote active citizenship). These autonomy teams should give rise to a new kind of teacher, less rooted in curricular teaching and more anchored to planning and didactic innovation. Yet much will depend on the number of staff made available to the schools. There is a risk that the autonomy teams will be diverted from these innovative tasks to be employed in substituting for other teachers. It also is possible that problematic teachers will be assigned to such horizontal tasks.

The third step toward more school autonomy is the strengthening of the prerogatives of the principals. They play a central role in developing the three-year plans, and above all, as we will see in the next section, they acquire substantial room for maneuver in the recruitment and teaching assignment of the teachers—unprecedented elements in Italy's educational system.

The fourth step that marks the growing autonomy of the schools, while simultaneously strengthening the role of the principal, is the establishment of a yearly fund of 200 million euros to enhance the performance of the teachers. The earmarked sum is significant as it

amounts to an average of more than 250 euros per teacher. Because these funds will be awarded to some teachers only, they will create a substantial incentive. When distributing these funds, the principal should avail him- or herself of a committee for the assessment of the teachers. Chaired by the principal, this committee will be composed of three of the school's teachers and two representatives of the parents (for kindergartens and elementary schools), or a representative of the pupils and a representative of the parents (for the secondary level of education). In addition, a member external to the school will have a seat on the committee. The regional education authorities will select that member from among the teachers and the principals of other schools. The committee shall specify the criteria to be employed for an evaluation of the teachers' performance on the basis of the quality of their teaching, their contribution to the improvement of the school, and the responsibilities they have assumed in the management of the school.

In reality, it is unlikely that the principal will choose to differentiate the remuneration of teachers on the basis of assessments of the quality of their teaching, as this would inevitably give rise to polemics and conflicts in the school, not least because any objective basis for comparison is missing. Instead, these funds most likely will be channeled toward those teachers who are primarily engaged in the governance of the school. Moreover, the reform establishes that principals may select from among the autonomy team up to 10 percent of teachers who will assist them in organizational and didactic support activities. As Renzi would say, each principal "picks his own team," and, we might add, each principal is now equipped with a significant economic lever to do so. Although it would appear to be essential, this aspect was largely passed over in the debates on the "super-principal." Whether the principal will be able to play a leadership role rests as much on his or her own faculties as on the ability to assemble a supporting group of teachers whose voices carry weight among their colleagues. This group must be willing to assume decision-making responsibilities and, if required, to ensure the appropriate mediation between the principal and the teaching staff. The reform offers the principal some levers to move in this direction and thus envisages an intermediate solution between two opposite and equally implausible models: the "solitary head" and "collegial co-determination."

The reform thus marks a far-reaching turning point in the governance of Italian schools. Up to now, recruitment has relied entirely on criteria of a formal bureaucratic nature, and remuneration has been differentiated according to criteria based on teachers' years of service and their engagement in "instrumental functions" (e.g., acting as the

school's contact person for career guidance). One should note that the reform of the schools' autonomy in 1997, in fact, had already notably strengthened the role of the principal. Moreover, this trend is hardly surprising because the larger degree of autonomy opens up a new decision-making space within the schools that the collegiate bodies cannot fill. Whoever has seen collegial interactions in educational institutions at work knows very well that those are not decision-making arrangements that could possibly handle the large number of delicate, complex, and timely decisions that the autonomous schools are called upon to make on a daily basis. These collegial bodies provide a forum for discussion on macro-level processes and spaces in which the principals can sound out and build support for new proposals. In the debate on the super-principal, however, the trade unions and the left of the PD saw the stronger position of the principal as a concession to entrepreneurial (manager-principal) or authoritarian (sheriff-principal) models that were even characterized as detrimental to the freedom of teaching. The teachers' unions, which in Italy have played a central role in the governance of the schools for decades, obviously intended to defend the prerogatives of their members. Yet above all, the strengthening of the principals should be seen as a foreseeable or even necessary consequence of the decisions made concerning the autonomy of the schools and the assessment of their performance. Let us see why.

### **The Governance of the Schools: The Assessment of Principals and Teachers**

In other Western countries, reforms that have provided for a larger degree of autonomy have been accompanied by a parallel strengthening of assessment and accountability mechanisms (Sestito 2014). The idea is that the larger degree of freedom conceded to the schools will allow for an improvement of their quality only when accompanied by mechanisms to verify how the schools use this autonomy (assessment), thus encouraging them to account for their own performance by means of systems of rewards and punishments (accountability). It is not clear that autonomy is always a good thing: some contextual conditions may, in fact, engender outcomes very different from those that are expected (*ibid.*). Moreover, there are different logics of accountability, each of which may fit more or less well with the characteristics of specific educational systems. These include (1) the creation of mechanisms to incentivize the individual teachers or schools to improve their performance; (2) the creation of forms of quasi-markets (e.g., vouchers for families allowing them to choose the school that

their children attend) by means of information on the quality of the schools made available by the central level; and (3) the privatization of the education system.

In Italy, the third solution has never enjoyed much support. The reform does grant private school reductions in social security contributions, but it would be too far-fetched to argue that this foreshadows a privatization of the educational system, as some trade union representatives have claimed. In fact, apart from the preschool segment, the numerical weight of private schools is marginal, and nothing would lead one to suspect that this situation will change significantly in the future. The second solution has also enjoyed only limited support in Italy, although the reform introduces a significant change that has gone unnoticed but might have a considerable impact. The reform provides for the creation of a web portal of the MIUR on which the schools will post their three-year plans of educational activities and their budgets, but also their self-assessment reports containing figures on the performance of the schools as measured by the Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione (SNV, National Evaluation System). This new feature explicitly aims to “allow for a comparative assessment by the pupils and their families” (Art. 2). In other words, it seeks to create a competitive dynamic between the schools. However, such competition entails quite a few unknowns, not least because the families are not well equipped to correctly interpret the indicators of (alleged) quality posted on a website by the public authorities. As the data on the performance of the schools are not based on value-added measures, the risk is that the families seeking to obtain information on the quality of the schools may end up deciding where to send their children not on the basis of the actual quality of the schools but on the basis of their socio-demographic composition. Publishing this information furthermore risks a growing discontent with the INVALSI tests (already substantial in May 2015) and their possible boycott or the temptation to fabricate results. Renzi’s government has pushed far ahead on the publication of the data of the SNV without adequately taking into account the associated risks, thus demonstrating little awareness of potential repercussions.

It is nevertheless clear that by means of the SNV, Italy has resolved to rely primarily on the first mechanism of accountability, that is, putting the schools in the position of assessing their own performance, but also using those assessments to lend support to schools in difficulty. In particular, as of the academic year 2014–2015, Italy has instituted an SNV that provides for a comprehensive assessment of the performance of each school on the basis of 49 statistical indicators. Although this detailed diagnostic tool has been put in place, some

important aspects of the performance of the schools are still neglected. Each school is called upon to compare itself to the national or provincial figure in order to understand how it is positioned relative to the other schools in the same area and with a similar social composition. The statistical indicators should thus provide an objective and comparable starting point for a discussion on which educational outcomes the school should improve urgently and what levers may be used to that end. This diagnosis is developed in the school's self-assessment report and constitutes the starting point for an improvement plan that should list how it intends to enhance its educational activities.

Establishing the SNV was the work of the Monti government, but, due to some delays, it was implemented only with the 2015–2016 academic year, that is, under the Renzi government. Whatever one may think of the SNV, it constitutes without doubt a significant change for the Italian school system, and the Good School reform can be understood only within the framework of the simultaneous reform of the SNV. Indeed, it should be kept in mind that if a school achieves disappointing results in the SNV and does not manage to improve in the subsequent years, no cuts in funding are foreseen, nor will its teachers be subject to sanctions or wage cuts. Instead, the principals will be rewarded or punished on the basis of their success or failure in achieving the objectives listed in the improvement plans. Simplifying somewhat, one can say that the SNV “unloads” the dynamics of accountability onto the school principals. In line with this basic decision, the Good School reform considers the principal to hold prime responsibility “for the efficiency and effectiveness of the management of the human, financial, technological, and material resources, as well as for the educational outcomes achieved” (Art. 16). More concretely, the reform increases the national fund for the remuneration of principals by 35 million euros annually as of 2016. This will allow for a considerable increase in the share of results-based remuneration of the principals.

The decision to strengthen the prerogatives of the principals can thus be understood within the logic of the SNV: the principals will be held responsible if their schools do not succeed in improving their performance. Such a solution would clearly have been incompatible with a context in which the principals were not able to select their own teachers or did not possess effective levers to involve them in improving the quality of the services offered. This inconsistency has now been mitigated, even though the staff that principals direct still largely depends on allocative mechanisms beyond their control. The combination of the Good School reform and the SNV thus outlines a new governance logic for the schools. On the basis of the self-assessment report, the principals must formulate a limited set of clear

objectives that they intend to pursue in order to improve the performance of the school, for example, by reducing the dropout rate. Based on this plan, the principal outlines the profiles of the teachers to be hired and selects them directly. For instance, from among the teachers listed in the rankings, the principal may give preference to those with previous experience in tackling dropout rates. The principal then establishes an autonomy team dedicated primarily to improving the school's performance and may also set up a group of teachers (the middle management of the school) who assist in the implementation of the improvement plan. Finally, the principal is now equipped with more financial incentives to reward those teachers who contribute to the activities of the school.

One may or may not agree with this model of governance, but it is important in any case to understand its internal logic. Unfortunately, the public debate on the Good School reform did not reflect on the close links between the growing autonomy of the schools, the implementation of the SNV, and the strengthening of the position of the principal, or on the obstacles that such a model will encounter during its application. If it had done so, the rhetorical bones of contention could have been reduced in favor of focusing the discussion on the problems of implementation, while simultaneously paying more attention to experiences from abroad that have exposed the difficulties and risks inherent in reforms such as this one. In fact, the risk is that the governance model outlined here remains a reform on paper only.

In particular, four major concerns with this model of governance will need to be addressed during the implementation phase. First, the SNV assumes that the schools are equipped with the necessary competences to analyze and interpret the statistical indicators it provides. However, experimental tests indicate that the ability of the schools to translate those figures into a diagnosis aimed at improving the school's performance is frequently weak. The schools also find it difficult to proceed from the self-diagnosis of a problem to the identification of possible solutions, mainly because Italy lacks repositories of good practices. Second, the Italian public administration has a very weak tradition of meritocratic assessment, and one might question whether the regional education authorities who are called upon to assess the principals would be able and willing to step outside of this tradition. Third, since the principals will be assessed on the basis of objectives that they themselves will formulate, they obviously will be tempted to set themselves objectives that will be easier to reach, or objectives measured by more malleable indicators. Yet these might not be the most relevant objectives. In theory, the improvement plan should be tightly linked to the self-assessment reports, but they will be examined

by external referees only in a small number of cases. Specifying the objectives thus risks becoming a self-referential exercise. Finally, this model of governance assumes that the principals, whose responsibilities are being enhanced, possess competences in planning, organization, and the management of human resources, which the majority of them in reality do not have (FGA 2013). It should be recalled that the principals have never been hired or trained with respect to such competences; they commonly are former teachers with expertise in bureaucratic management. In short, the governance model that is taking shape does exhibit internal coherence but operates with a rather unrealistic view of the key actors (teachers, principals, and regional education authorities) who are called upon to implement it. The criticisms raised by the trade unions and the left of the PD have neglected these aspects, focusing instead on issues that have an immediate impact on the teachers (the super-principal, the privatization of the schools). In this public debate, Renzi, in his turn, has emphasized the major investment in the schools and the special plan for hiring teachers—two issues that are assured to please the teachers.

### **The Recruitment of Teachers**

Renzi's promotional video depicted the Good School reform as the ultimate solution to the problem of precarious jobs in the Italian schools ("we say enough to precarious jobs and to substituting"), as it envisaged 100,000 immediate appointments to be followed by annual competitive examinations for tenured positions.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the reform has opted to eliminate the long-standing prevalence of precarious jobs in Italian schools, that is, the so-called *graduatorie ad esaurimento* (GAE, full-list rankings),<sup>8</sup> a cumbersome inheritance that, in effect, was no longer tenable. The recruitment of teachers has for a long time taken place through waves of mass hiring and ad hoc measures, a practice that has given rise to inconsistencies between the actual situation and the formal requirements for obtaining teaching positions. Such a path involves many years of precarious employment, in addition to uncertainties connected to multiple channels of access, changing rules, and frequent legal appeals to employment decisions.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, there was a need to ensure more didactic continuity and a fair remuneration to those who had been teaching on temporary contracts for many years. Moreover, the body of Italian teachers is among the oldest in the world (OECD 2015), and its rejuvenation would seem desirable. In the coming years, large numbers of Italian teachers will reach retirement age, and a more

substantial recruitment drive would thus have been necessary in any case. Finally, the European Court of Justice handed down a verdict in November 2014 condemning Italy for the excessive use of temporary employment in schools. With the Good School reform, Renzi's government has seized a contingent and financially burdensome opportunity to introduce a broader reform of the school system. A problem that could no longer be postponed was used to induce change while presenting the last-minute rescue in a positive light as a measure to rejuvenate the Italian teaching body and to overcome the problem of precarious employment. However, it is doubtful whether this will in fact occur as the teachers listed on the GAE are of above-average age (Bombardi and Checchi 2015). The fact remains that the Good School reform has provided a policy opportunity that the prime minister was the first to exploit in order to forcefully project the image of a government investing in education.

From the start, three other aspects of the decision to eliminate the GAE gave more reason for concern (FGA 2014). The first was the existence of a spatial and skills mismatch between those who were in the GAE rankings and the actual need for teachers. For example, mathematics teachers are in great demand, but there were only few of them in these rankings, while music teachers, for whom there is little demand, were abundantly present. Second, a substantial share of those listed on the GAE did not have an SISS teaching qualification<sup>9</sup> or a degree in pedagogy and had not taught for some years, or never even did so. Finally, there was a need to address the unfair treatment of the many qualified candidates listed on the rankings of the individual schools—an alternative channel for obtaining a teaching position—instead of on the GAE. Those rankings contain candidates who on average are younger than those listed on the GAE and more closely match the needs of the schools. The mass hiring from the GAE has thus given precedence to a formal as opposed to a substantial criterion. Fenced in between a verdict of the Court of Justice and the pressure of the trade unions, there were obvious constraints on the choices that the government could make. If it had introduced distinctions between those listed on the GAE, it could have run the risk of additional legal appeals, while discontinuing the GAE had a high public relations value since it could be presented as “the end of precarious jobs.”

Nevertheless, after the decision to hire all those on the GAE, many believed that the best candidates might not have been hired, maybe not even the candidates whom the schools needed (and still need). Moreover, it is likely that the next few years will see a staff turnover even more pronounced than the already high level currently experienced. In fact, precisely because of the spatial and skills mismatch,

appointment from the GAE implies for many of the newly hired teachers the need to relocate and/or to accept employment on the autonomy teams. Estimates from July 2015 indicate that almost half of those newly hired had been assigned to these horizontal tasks (Bombardi and Checchi 2015). The great risk is that those teachers will effectively be employed on strengthening the schools' autonomy and will not enjoy all the opportunities that the system offers them to change school in the shortest possible time. Moreover, the problem of precarious working conditions is far from being solved. In fact, because of the skills mismatch, some teachers continue to be employed on unstable contracts; this is especially the case in the sciences, where the GAE had little to offer. However, it should be noted that the reform has also provided for a national competitive examination,<sup>10</sup> thus establishing a regular rhythm in the recruitment process.

The reform provides for a further important change in matters of recruitment: the principal may directly and explicitly—also by means of job interviews—select the tenured teachers assigned to the school district. This is a very significant change for Italian schools. Such positions have a duration of three years, and it is up to the principal to decide whether or not to renew them. The selection of the teachers, however, is not left solely to the discretion of the principal, as four criteria must be met. First, the teachers to be appointed must be listed on the rankings or have won a competitive examination; thus, they have been pre-selected according to universalistic criteria. Second, the principal must specify the profiles of the candidates, which must conform to the needs indicated in the three-year plan of educational activities. Third, the principal is expected to publish the positions filled, the selection criteria used, and the curricula vitae of the candidates on the site of the school. Fourth, the principal must formally declare the absence of any conflicts of interest deriving from marriage, family relationships, or affinity with the newly hired teachers. Still, the possibility that a principal may manage to favor family members or acquaintances cannot be discounted. Moreover, the principal might choose candidates with an affinity toward his or her own values or political views.

A final new feature in the recruitment of teachers is the creation of a new channel of access to teaching positions in secondary schools, which over time, is destined to become the only channel. In future, the candidate-teachers will attend university-level master degree courses corresponding to the subjects listed in the examinations. After having passed a national competitive examination, those selected will be hired by a school on a three-year internship contract. In the first year, the teachers should obtain a postgraduate teaching certificate, also

issued by the universities, while in the two following years the interns will work in the schools. At the end of this three-year period, they will be appointed on an open-ended contract. Although it remains to be seen what exact rules will apply to this process, it nevertheless appears a rather convincing solution because it draws on the best previous experiences: a short and concentrated university education on the skills needed in the classroom is combined with a long period of on-the-job training. At the same time, and in contrast to the current situation, the candidate-teachers are given certainty concerning the duration of their temporary employment.

Lastly, the reform has introduced the requirement of lifelong learning for teachers while giving those with open-ended contracts a bonus of 500 euros annually to be spent on educational activities. This additional investment in human capital sends a signal concerning the importance of the continuous upgrading of the teachers' skills, even though this indiscriminate distribution of funds may not be very effective and actually looks more like an attempt to enlist support for the reforms.

In sum, one of the signature themes of the reform, that is, the abolition of precarious jobs in the school system, in reality appears to be a political move (partly bold and partly inevitable) whose priority is not the improvement of the quality of the teaching. The problem of the GAE was courageously tackled after years of inertia, but some critical issues—the effective staff needs of the schools, the adequate qualification of the teachers, and their continuous presence in the same school—have become secondary concerns. At the same time, the Good School reform envisages future access channels to teaching positions that constitute a change with more bright sides than shadows.

### **Strengthening the Humanistic Curriculum, the Liberal Arts, and Job Training**

One key theme of the Good School reform was the strengthening of humanistic education. The reform insisted on the need to upgrade the teaching of art history and music (and of physical education in primary schools). Simultaneously, more weight was to be given to the teaching of English at all educational levels. Moreover, at several points the text insists on the importance of digital skills. These new features would appear to be more an instance of symbolic politics than an effective change, as schools are urged to give more weight to these subject matters but without changing the teaching schedules to make space for them. Rather, the aim is to change the opinion that the teachers and managers have of those subjects.

A similar conclusion holds for the job skills of the pupils. It is well known that the ability of Italian schools to prepare students for the labor market is very weak. The Good School reform intends to improve the employability of pupils with three measures. First, the courses that provide for an alternation between school and work will be strengthened at the high school level. Such courses combine internships in companies with school activities that emphasize job skills (e.g., classes on tasks to be performed in private companies). Such courses have been offered for 10 years, but only as optional activities, and up to now they have been of rather limited duration: on average 95 hours for each student (INDIRE 2015). The time spent in the companies thus amounts to little more than a short visit. The reform transforms these courses into mandatory activities for all pupils in the final three years of high school, with an overall duration of at least 400 hours spread over three years for the technical and vocational high schools and of at least 200 hours for the high schools that prepare students for a university education. Moreover, 100 million euros have been set aside to support these courses.

Three shortcomings of this measure should be mentioned. The first is the decision to extend these courses to the high schools that prepare their pupils for a university education. The goal was to avoid a juxtaposition between these schools and schools oriented toward the labor market (technical and vocational high schools), but it remains to be seen if this will actually help to bridge a divide that exists in practice. In high schools preparing students for a university degree, the uptake of such courses has been very limited: only 2 percent of the pupils attending these courses come from such schools (INDIRE 2015). Nevertheless, the reform obliges these schools to offer them (contradicting the emphasis on the autonomy of the schools, one might add), albeit with fewer hours and allowing for the possibility of internships with professional associations and cultural institutions such as museums. The second shortcoming concerns regional disparities. Figures from INDIRE (2015) indicate that courses combined with internships are used least where there is the most need for them, that is, in the southern regions, which lack a fabric of productive activities that would be able to support such educational activities in an effective and non-opportunistic way. The more general question is whether those in the Italian private sector are sufficiently mature to conceive of these courses as an investment in the quality of their future labor force, or whether they will give in to facile opportunism. In any case, the Good School reform requires that the pupils be given the opportunity to express their opinion on the courses taken. Moreover, a bill of the rights and duties of the pupils has been issued, and hopefully it will contain the risk that the internship

degenerates into unskilled labor. The third shortcoming derives from the limited propensity of the schools to offer such courses and to make space for them in the curriculum. It is likely that these courses, rather than promoting entry into the labor market, end up having an informative function or become mere formalities.

The second measure to improve the employability of pupils is intended to stimulate networks of schools, private companies, and public bodies to create “local laboratories for employability” that will offer training activities in strategic sectors of Italian-made products. The goal is to further open up the schools to links with the surrounding area and to allow for the use of the school premises outside of school hours. Despite generous funding (45 million euros in the academic year 2015–2016), there is a risk that these initiatives will remain too sporadic, fragmented, and small-scale to produce significant results.

The third measure is intended to strengthen the higher colleges of technology (*istituti tecnici superiori*). In collaboration with private companies and local authorities, these technical or vocational institutes will offer two- or three-year postgraduate courses with a strong vocational orientation in some of the sectors where there is a high demand for qualified technicians. In such courses, students will spend a substantial number of hours in companies, which will be actively involved in the overall design of the educational activities. Up to now, the number of students involved has been limited, but the preliminary figures on their employment opportunities are rather encouraging (INDIRE 2015). The Good School reform acknowledges these positive outcomes and stimulates their growth with an additional, if somewhat small, 1 million euros. Accordingly, this educational segment is destined to remain of modest dimensions, even though the Italian industry is in great need of a tertiary vocational segment.

Clearly, the underlying goal of these measures is to strengthen the ability of the Italian education system in order to effectively promote employability. However, it was decided not to make decisive changes in the set-up of the curriculum or the teaching schedules, thus limiting the reforms to marginal segments and activities that have a weak impact. These measures therefore seem destined to remain little more than a declaration of intent.

## Conclusions

Overall, the Good School reform sends four clear messages: (1) the need to empower principals and teachers within a meritocratic framework; (2) the desire to put an end to the long history of precarious

employment in the education system and to establish a new way of recruiting; (3) the call for schools to open themselves up to the external world and create stronger links with the labor market; and (4) the necessity of investing additional resources in education (after many years of opposite developments). The reform has been communicated in a very effective manner, bordering on disingenuousness. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to harbor doubts concerning its effective implementation. The changes in the governance of the schools are based on assumptions concerning the skills and objectives of principals, teachers, and regional education authorities that are not very realistic. In terms of the quality of the teachers hired and of their effective correspondence to the needs of the schools, the reform of the recruitment process is rather debatable. The curricular and extra-curricular changes are destined to have a limited impact. In addition, a non-trivial shortcoming for a reform launched by a center-left coalition deserves to be underlined: topics such as combating inequality and equal opportunities for disadvantaged students are almost entirely absent. It is interesting to note how little the opponents of the reform have dwelled on these conspicuous contradictions.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that Renzi and his government have shown courage in tackling an old and unresolved problem and in taking clear positions that contrast with the protection of the corporate interests of the teachers, an approach that is traditionally prioritized by the trade unions and the Democratic Party. In short, less has been done than was announced, but more than one might have expected from a coalition government led by a party that has produced very few innovations in education policies in the recent past.

### **Acknowledgments**

We wish to extend thanks to Paolo Sestito for comments on a preliminary version of this chapter.

— *Translated by Ton Notermans*

---

**Gianluca Argentin** is Lecturer in Sociology at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan.

**Carlo Barone** is Professor at the Observatoire Sociologique du Changement, Sciences Po, Paris.

## Notes

1. See Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 162, <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/07/15/15G00122/sg>.
2. “Scuola, la riforma di Renzi: 3 miliardi per assumere 148mila docenti entro il 2015,” 3 September 2014, <http://www.ilmessaggero.it/> (accessed 30 December 2015).
3. “La buona scuola: Le linee guida della riforma,” <https://labuonascuola.gov.it> (accessed 30 December 2015).
4. “Gelmini: La riforma della scuola Renzi-Giannini è vittoria per la nostra tradizione,” <http://www.forzaitalia.it/notizie/11395/gelmini-la-riforma-della-scuola-renzi-giannini-e-vittoria-per-la-nostra-tradizione/> (accessed 30 December 2015).
5. These are standardized linguistic and mathematical tests taken each year by Italian pupils.
6. “Sciopero scuola 5 maggio 2015 contro la riforma. Renzi: ‘Ascoltiamo la protesta,’” 7 May 2015, <http://www.ansa.it/> (accessed 30 December 2015).
7. “Scuola, Renzi: ‘Riforma non del premier o ministro, ma di tutti,’” 3 September 2014, <http://www.repubblica.it/> (accessed 30 December 2015).
8. All the candidates on the GAE were eventually to be offered a position, as compared to only the top-ranked one(s) in the case of regular rankings.
9. The SISS (*scuole di specializzazione all’insegnamento secondario*) are university courses dedicated to training the new teachers of the secondary schools.
10. The call for the national examination was to be published by 1 December 2015, but it has been postponed to the beginning of 2016.

## References

- Bombardi, S., and D. Checchi. 2015. “Buona Scuola: I numeri sui nuovi assunti.” *Lavoce*, 23 July. <http://www.lavoce.info/archives/36218/buona-scuola-i-neri-sui-nuovi-assunti/>.
- FGA (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli). 2013. “Le competenze manageriali dei dirigenti scolastici italiani.” Working Paper No. 48/2013. [http://www.fga.it/uploads/media/Di\\_Liberto\\_\\_Schivardi\\_\\_Sideri\\_\\_Sulis\\_\\_Le\\_competenze\\_manageriali\\_dei\\_Dirigenti\\_Scolastici\\_italiani\\_-\\_FGA\\_WP48.pdf](http://www.fga.it/uploads/media/Di_Liberto__Schivardi__Sideri__Sulis__Le_competenze_manageriali_dei_Dirigenti_Scolastici_italiani_-_FGA_WP48.pdf).
- FGA (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli). 2014. “La Buona Scuola: Il contributo critico della Fondazione Agnelli.” 17 November. <http://www.fga.it/it/news/tutte-le-news/dettaglio/article/la-buona-scuola-il-contributo-critico-della-fondazione-agnelli-520.html>.
- INDIRE (Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa). 2014. *Monitoraggio degli istituti tecnici superiori*. Florence: INDIRE.

- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2015. *Education at a Glance 2015*. OECD Indicators. <http://www.oecd.org>.
- Riccardi, K. 2015. "Ddl 'Buona scuola' è legge. Ma è caos nel Pd: Solo 277 voti. A favore 4 verdiniani." *La Repubblica*, 9 July.
- Sestito, P. 2014. *La scuola imperfetta*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Vendemiale, L. 2015. "Scuola, ecco la controriforma del M5S: 'Stop finanziamenti a private, più docenti.'" *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 27 February.