

THE COMMUNITY ROOTS OF REFORMED TEACHER TRAINING IN REFORMED PUBLIC EDUCATION CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

In our study, we examine the strategic dimensions of the mutual influence of Reformed public education and Reformed teacher training. Following a brief description of the Reformed education subsystem, we attempt to review the challenges facing the Reformed education subsystem primarily through the lens of higher education and then formulate possible breakthrough points that could provide solutions to today's challenges in educational theory and organisation, with particular regard to the possibilities of Reformed teacher training in this process. This assessment is particularly relevant given that the Reformed Church in Hungary is currently developing the "RefHáló" public education and vocational training network development strategy, which seeks systemic responses and formulates action plans for the sustainability and development of Reformed education.

KEYWORDS: *Reformed public education, educational strategy, higher education, network building*

INTRODUCTION

In our study, we examine the strategic dimensions of the mutual influence of Reformed public education and Reformed teacher training. Following a brief description of the Reformed education subsystem, we attempt to review the challenges facing the Reformed education subsystem primarily from the perspective of higher education and then formulate possible breakthrough points and responses that could provide solutions to the challenges facing educational theory and organization today, with particular regard to the possibilities for Reformed teacher training in this process. Our study is particularly relevant at this time because experts commissioned by the Reformed Church in Hungary are currently developing the "RefHáló" public education and vocational training network development strategy, which seeks systemic responses and formulates action plans for the sustainability and development of Reformed education.

REFORMED SUBSYSTEM

If we want to examine the social embeddedness of denominational higher education, we must look at the educational subsystem in which the given higher education programme is implemented, as well as the social subsystem that ensures its *raison d'être* and market demand. In our case, we must first examine the extent to which the Reformed educational subsystem can be considered a well-

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developed network in terms of Reformed teacher training, distinguished from state or other educational systems by its specific mission, internal structure and self-motivation. "Through network cooperation, knowledge management and innovation capacity, a cooperative network of public education institutions can produce an unique 'product' and acquire resources that help them compete in the region and at the same time serve as good practice for other groups in the sector." (Ábrám, 2016, p. 57)

According to Halász (2001), an education system is a system (1) which the entire population enters, (2) whose operation is regulated by laws with national validity, (3) which is financed mainly from public funds, and (4) which is supervised by the political authorities of the country concerned.

Halász (2001) identifies the following eight functions of education systems:

- shaping the personality of individuals,
- reproducing culture,
- facilitating the reproduction or transformation of the social structure,
- facilitating the functioning and growth of the economy,
- legitimising the political system,
- ensuring social integration,
- providing various direct services,
- promoting or curbing social change.
- providing enjoyment.

Halász sees the education system as a set of subsystems with varying degrees of autonomy and different institutional characteristics, which, despite being organised into an unified system, have retained some of their autonomy. These subsystems have different functions, are organised in different ways and have their own momentum. Their existence, independence or development are of interest to specific social and professional groups, which may therefore compete with each other for resources or other advantages. (Halász, 2001)

Looking at the characteristics of education systems, we can conclude that the Reformed school system is a subsystem of the Hungarian public education system (Kopp 2007, 2020). Examining the conditions of the subsystem as defined by Halász (2001) – i.e. anyone can enter the system, the functioning of the system is regulated by laws with national validity, it is basically financed from public funds, and supervision of the system is exercised by the political authorities of the country – the Reformed public education network meets all of these conditions, but at the same time, it has relative autonomy from the highly centralised state system, is characterised by institutional specificities, has different functions, is organised differently, maintains itself and is characterised by a specific self-motivation (Simon, 2022).

How do the characteristics of the denominational subsystem manifest themselves in this system?

The Christian (biblical) view of humanity is fundamental to **the formation of individual personalities**. Humans are the (distorted) image of God, and God uses humans (teachers) as instruments of His creative intent to restore this distortion. For this reason, Christian pedagogy cannot be human-centred, but only God-centred, value-transmitting pedagogy. This is difficult to say in a place where student-centred pedagogical thinking is mainstream. Yet we can accept it, because we believe that no one respects human beings more than those who value them as the image of God, even if they are broken, and who value them as those whom God has deemed worthy of salvation. We consider disrespect for people and violations of human dignity to be disrespect and an insult to God. (Zila, 2016, p. 8)

In the reproduction of culture, special emphasis must be placed on the Judeo-Christian tradition, the cultural history of the Reformation era, and the Protestant cultural tradition.

In connection with **the reproduction or transformation of the social structure**, the primary task of Reformed education is to strengthen and recruit its own community living in congregations, to provide new professionals for the institutional system maintained by the church, and (largely through the former) to stimulate and maintain social demand for church institutions and communities. The maintenance and expansion of the institutional system leads to **the promotion of economic functioning and growth** as a systemic function.

With regard to the Reformed educational subsystem, **the legitimisation of the political system** is in fact present in the legitimisation of the church organisation (and government), the emphasis on the cohesive power of the structure, and the strengthening of cohesion between the interdependent organisational elements.

In a religious sense, **ensuring social integration** can be understood as missionary activity and evangelisation among the widest possible sections of society (cf. **the function of bringing joy**).

The provision of various direct services is achieved through the diversification of the church's welfare system and the creation of synergies between institutions and (primarily social) service areas.

The promotion or restraint of social change in the Reformed Church is manifested in the duality of tradition and modernisation, with particular regard to the (apparent) contradiction that one of the oldest traditions of the Reformed Church and education is renewal (*ecclesia semper reformanda est*).

According to Ábrám (2019), the mission of the Reformed institutional system can be divided into three components: (1) a transcendent mission, which provides the essence and foundation of the institutional system, (2) an internal mission towards the teaching staff and students, and (3) an external mission, which determines the mission possibilities and orientation of the institutions.

According to Witzel (2018), the organisation must define as clearly and precisely as possible what values it represents, what these values mean to it and what it believes in, what activities it is willing to tolerate and what is unacceptable to it. This is particularly true for institutions with a committed worldview, as one of the key issues in denominational institution maintenance is whether the maintainer is able to formulate an immanent value system that functions as a connecting link between the maintaining community, its institutional system and its individual institutions.

Of course, the reasons for maintaining the institutional system are not only financial and educational, but also missionary: "Will having a Reformed school in the community enable it to communicate better with the local society or not? If, for example, there is a weak Reformed community with few believers and the majority of the community is of a different religion, then there is no point in taking over the school. However, if the denominations are balanced in a community and even the other denominations see it as a good thing for the Reformed Church to take on denominational education, then we see potential in this, because in practice it is possible to reach out to the other churches, as it is important to them that Catholic or Lutheran religious education is available in the school, and they are obviously able to communicate with parents through the institution." (Tomasz, 2019, p. 358)

In the case of denominational public education institutions, the usual three consumer dimensions (students, parents, society) are complemented by a fourth, namely the community of those belonging to the denomination. Thus, the consumer, i.e. the direct user, also includes the maintainer, who indirectly expects the institution to ensure the supply of new professionals and who, through their community and the wider institutional system, will provide direct feedback on the product of the institution they maintain, i.e. the graduates. (Tolnai, 2022)

In the following, we will primarily attempt to review the challenges facing the Reformed education subsystem through the lens of higher education and then identify possible breakthrough points that could provide solutions to today's challenges in educational theory and organisation, with a particular focus on the potential of Reformed teacher training in this process.

ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

The Reformed Church has maintained public education institutions for centuries. Education and training in its institutions are provided in accordance with general state and local government requirements, but also in the spirit of God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures, the Reformed creeds and Hungarian Calvinism. The Synod regulates and supervises the intellectual and material affairs of all public education and vocational training institutions of the Reformed Church in Hungary, coordinates their operation, and prepares and approves the medium- and long-term education and training concept of the Reformed Church in Hungary. In the 2023/24 academic year, there are 204 Reformed public education and vocational training institutions operating in 568 locations in 238 municipalities. The 204 institutions are maintained by 144 Reformed church legal entities. There are nearly 6,000 teachers in Reformed public education and nearly 61,000 students.⁸⁴

However, this significant institutional system has developed in a differentiated manner in terms of time and space, and in many cases it has come about by chance. The geographical location of the institutional system is uneven, partly for sociological and demographic reasons.

The spatial pattern of the institutions follows the denominational character, so that, similar to the spread of the Reformed religion, the institutional network is also concentrated in north-eastern Hungary.

However, the establishment, reopening and takeover of institutions in recent decades has not been preceded by systematic, scientifically based analysis of either recruitment or retention. Similarly, conscious planning of students' career paths and the development of organisational and professional cooperation between successive levels of education are only typical at the local level, at the level of the institutions themselves.

This shortcoming is not new and is not unknown within the church. The *Report and Proposal for the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary on the Strategy for the Development of the Public Education System of the Reformed Church in Hungary*, adopted by the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary with Resolution No. ZS. - 39/2018.11.22. The first strategic area of the document concerns the development of the public education system of the Reformed Church in Hungary from a regional perspective and according to institutional levels. The draft considers it a fundamental task to examine where in Hungary there is a need for additional Reformed public education institutions and what type or level of institution is needed. In this strategic area, the 2018 strategy proposes the following measures: (1) Prior to establishing a new Reformed institution or taking over its maintenance rights, the expected impact on the micro-regional institutional network, the opportunities, risks and possible sources of conflict shall be assessed. The local Reformed community regards the establishment of a Reformed institution as an expansion of services. (2) While maintaining the current level, within 15 years there should be at least one Reformed kindergarten and primary school in every Hungarian town with a population of over 20,000. (3) Where possible, there should be a Reformed secondary school in every county town and within a 50 km radius of any settlement. (4) The planned and organised protection of learning

⁸⁴ Source of data: <https://reformatusegyhaz.hu/oktatas/> (Downloaded: 22 July 2025)

paths shall be ensured for students entering the Reformed institutional system. (5) A career guidance system shall operate in every school. The career guidance work of Reformed schools shall give preference to areas of church service. The monitoring of young people continuing their education in secondary and higher education institutions shall be implemented. (6) Cooperation between Reformed schools shall create a national talent development network. (7) The Reformed institution maintenance system shall operate as a network based on regional cooperation, which also provides operational security for small institutions.

Looking back over nearly seven years, it can be said that the goals set out in the resolution have only been partially achieved so far. For reasons of space, we will refrain from a detailed analysis, but we will attempt to evaluate the implementation of the 2018 strategic goals in a few sentences.

(1) The preparations for the takeover of state institutions are still inadequate, entail significant risks, are generally not coordinated with other actors in the region, and often involve institutions that are financially unsustainable. A complete Reformed educational pathway is possible, but not guaranteed in all regions. The lower standard of operation of the institutions is partly due to a lack of cooperation and knowledge sharing. Local needs often do not take into account the higher-level requirements of regional operation and the educational pathway of students. ("RefHáló" Maintaining Structure, Institutional Network Working Group Working Document 2025)

Based on the maps above, it is clear that points (2) and (3) have not been fully implemented, and there is no centrally accessible database suitable for comparison and evaluation of points (4) and (5). The cooperation described in point (6) is implemented within the framework of the Reformed EGYMI (Unified Center for Special Education and Methodology) and the RTA (Reformed Talent Development Foundation), but these organisations do not have full access to talent development within the Reformed education network. The cooperation network described in point (7) is implemented professionally through the network of base institutions of the Reformed Pedagogical Institute and financially on a voluntary basis within the framework of the Reformed Public Education Pre-Financing Fund.

It is no coincidence that the Presidium of the Reformed Church in Hungary decided to draw up a *"Strategy for the Development of the Public Education System of the Reformed Church in Hungary"* and a *"Strategy for the Development of Education in the Reformed Church in Hungary 2022-2026"*, taking into account taking into account the social, technological, legal and educational policy changes that have taken place in the meantime, it will draw up *Development strategy and action plan of the public education and vocational training network in the Reformed Church in Hungary for the period 2026-2030*.

STAFFING CHALLENGES

It is undeniable that "there is a kind of anti-political and anti-religious sentiment deep in the fabric of contemporary European thinking. This is a natural feature of European culture, resulting from historical developments." (Pusztai & Török, 2017, p. 344) According to international research, Hungary ranks 20th out of 34 European countries in terms of religiousness (Pew Research, 2018). In a European comparison, church schools in Hungary are viewed more favourably than other schools in the non-state sector (Dronkers & Avram, 2015). In terms of the intertwining of state and religion, Hungary's values have been rising over the last two decades, "against a backdrop of factors such as the religious references in the 2011 constitution, the establishment of state-run religious organisations, the introduction of ethics/religion and moral education in public education, and state support for churches and church schools." (Pusztai & Török, 2017, p. 345)

Two parallel processes have been taking place in Hungarian society in recent decades. On the one hand, the number and proportion of people who identify themselves as religious is steadily declining, while at the same time, at a different pace, the number of church-run public institutions, primarily public education institutions, and the number of children and students attending them is steadily increasing.

According to data from 2020, "the number of church-run schools has doubled in the last 8-10 years. For example, in the 2010/2011 school year, churches operated 197 primary schools and 108 secondary schools, but by 2019, these numbers had risen to 378 and 172, respectively. The situation is similar in kindergartens: ten years ago, there were 141 church-run kindergartens, but last year [2019] there were already 282." (Eduline, 2020)

In 2022, 14.5% of jobs were held by churches, which were attended by 15.9% of children and students (233,370 people). Of the 146,745 teachers employed in public education in 2022, 15.6% (22,861) worked in church-run institutions (Table 1).

1. *table: Share of church-run public education in the Hungarian public education system, 2023⁸⁵.*

	TOTAL	CHURCH-RUN
Place of employment	10,421	1,547
teachers	145,093	23,385
children, pupils	1,463,555	239,839
kindergarten groups, school classes	69,325	10,892

As can be seen, the proportion of teachers working in church-run institutions is 15.57%. According to a study by Rosta and Máthé-Tóth (2022), in 2020, approximately 18% of the Hungarian population was religious (i.e. attended religious services regularly).

Numerous studies show that teachers' religious and denominational commitment and their uniform system of values and norms are key factors in the effective functioning of denominational schools (Morvai, 2015). Obviously, not all religious teachers work in church-run institutions, so although the ethical code of the National Reformed Teachers' Association states that "it is desirable that educators be devout and self-sacrificing members of their own congregation and church" (ORTE, 1998, p. 8), we can be sure that there is a significant proportion of teachers who teach in church-run institutions without identifying with the beliefs of the institution that runs them. According to Pusztai's data, in 2017 only 65.2% of teachers in Reformed public education institutions were religiously affiliated. (Pusztai, 2020, p. 56) According to one of the working documents of the "RefHáló" education strategy, it is a general experience that the majority of our teaching staff are not committed to the church or to their faith. ("RefHáló" Faith Education, Content and Organisational Framework for Religious Education Working Group Working Document, 2025)

There is no doubt that the intellectual and organisational environment of education is changing dynamically today. The effectiveness of education systems is increasingly being assessed by education researchers in terms of the labour market and economic performance, while schools are being forced to take on more and more educational tasks from families. In Europe and North America, the consensual educational principles that formed the common basis for socialisation

⁸⁵ Based on KSH data (ksh.hu)

have broken down, while at the same time individualisation, the pursuit of autonomy, heightened and often changing identity needs are gaining ground, even among the youngest generations.

To counteract the negative social effects of these phenomena, several researchers see the revival of religious education traditions as an appropriate tool. Vermeer argues that religious education in schools makes a unique contribution to the cultural and normative integration of students (Vermeer, 2010, p. 104). Although the traditional role of denominational schools in Europe (the religious education and socialisation of members of closed religious communities of school age) is in decline, new dimensions have emerged in the education and teaching of denominational schools. These include the transmission of religious cultural traditions, the implementation of an educational philosophy based on a Christian view of humanity, and the teaching of community behaviour, even to children from families with little or no connection to the church. Belonging to the same religious community can significantly strengthen the community cohesion of an institution. While the student (and family) community of schools organised on a local (district) basis is contingent, in schools with a functional community (e.g. church schools), all stakeholders (maintainers, leaders, teachers, parents, children) are members of a community organised around the same values (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

The unique identity of institutions has a significant impact on which values are considered important to convey by the teachers working there (Morvai, 2015). The role of the headteacher is indispensable in this unique value system. According to Bánné's 2025 research, "the personality and commitment of the headteacher is decisive." (Bánné, 2025, p. 145) For this reason, even if we do not go into detail here, we must mention the issue of leadership selection and training. (Church) leadership training must take a particularly multifaceted approach to students, taking into account the requirements of institutional identity, management methodology and the tensions arising from the leader's personality (Hézszer, 2008).

MISSIONARY CHALLENGES

In light of the above, it can be stated that the establishment and maintenance of denominational (in our case, Reformed) institutions has serious missionary significance. However, beyond this recognition, it would be necessary to conduct a data-based survey of the current institutional network with regard to the religiosity of teachers, students and families and their relationship to the church. Based on this data, clusters could be formed to determine the necessary actions to serve the missionary goals of the maintaining denomination.

The problem is that most parents are unfamiliar with the church environment, they do not know Reformed customs or basic Christian teachings, and in many cases they are confronted with a world and words that are incomprehensible to them at church services, which they find difficult to relate to. In addition to their lack of knowledge and experience of the church world, they are unable to connect the faith presented to them with their everyday lives. We must therefore seek forms that are acceptable to them and speak to them personally, which can advance the formation of their own convictions and their integration into the congregation. (RefHáló Faith Education, Content and Organisational Framework for Religious Education Working Group Working Document 2025)

Consequently, missionary work is also essential in the educational institutions of the Church. The faith panels and customary practices that have worked well for families who are connected to the Church and are believers, seem to be becoming hollow as more and more non-believing students and families enter our institutions. This mission is hindered and delayed by the fact that educational

institutions are still seen by many as merely places of education where students come to learn. (ibid.)

Even today, it is true that ways of strengthening missionary identity must be found across a wide range of institutions, from those rooted in congregations with a conscious missionary identity to those that are still learning about their church and Reformed identity and have virtually no community ties (EJB, 2014, p. 57). “Those who are reached, educated and cared for by institutions, and those who work in them, do not necessarily choose Reformed institutions because they are motivated by their church and Reformed identity, but rather out of convenience, compulsion or other motivations. Two main branches of mission have emerged in relation to them, which are fundamentally characterised by: 1) ‘softening’ them with the warmth of Christ’s love, thus integrating them into the church. 2) ‘forcing’ them into the church community with the demanding, sometimes coercive authority of the church. These two main approaches, which we assume are always based on the Holy Scriptures and motivated by good intentions, presuppose completely different missionary perspectives and courses of action.” (EJB, 2014, p. 57)

In this process, it is essential to clarify (1) *who*, (2) *to whom*, and (3) *what kind* of service the denominational institution undertakes within its framework, i.e. (1) how the institution defines itself, what its actual human, organisational, and spiritual resources are, (2) who constitutes the typical user group or groups of the institution, what their motivations are, and what prior religious and social socialisation they have had before coming to the institution, and (3) what are the definitive goals and aspirations accepted by the maintainer, the institution and its users, which characterise the educational work of the institution and distinguish it from the mission of other similar types of institutions.

CONTENT CHALLENGES

With increasingly centralised education administration and centrally regulated content and (further) training requirements, the question arises more and more clearly as to what extent it is possible to take denominational characteristics into account in the determination of the curriculum in Reformed public education. Of course, we are not referring here to the regulation of the content of religious education, but to the Christian/Protestant/Reformed characteristics of general knowledge content. Is there an opportunity, time frame or teaching aid, for example, in the teaching of Hungarian literary history, for in-depth study, analysis and reflection on the literature of the Reformation or, regardless of the period, on the confessional works of Christian/Protestant literary authors? Are specifically Protestant perspectives included in history teaching, whether in relation to Hungarian or universal history? Is special emphasis placed on the values of Reformed church architecture in art history teaching? Do we take seriously the teaching of Protestant church music, which is theoretically included in the curriculum?

Within the framework of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the Reformed Curriculum Development Group was established in early April 2017 and operated until November 2022 with the aim of developing a curriculum for the Reform with the aim of creating high-quality teaching materials for the Reformed public education system that support Christian education and cover subjects of general interest. When defining the development principles, the focus was on the complex understanding of the created world and the development of communication skills in the mother tongue, taking into account both the traditions of Christian education and modern pedagogical principles. The developers involved innovative teachers from Reformed institutions in the development and testing of the teaching materials. With the help of development partners,

they also introduced the institutions to educational innovations that can help them shape and develop their pedagogical approach. In addition to the paper-based publications, digital teaching materials were also produced to support the professional work of teachers. (Reftantár)

"As strange as it may sound, the least important thing is to produce textbooks in Budapest that are then made compulsory for use in Csurgó, Papkeszi or any other Reformed institution in the country. Schools don't work like that; we have to win the trust of teachers. Curriculum development can only work well if they are interested in it and feel that it is their own." (Feke, 2019)

The basic principles of Reformed curriculum development formulated in 2017:

- the curriculum should present the created world in its entirety and point out the connections between phenomena,
- the curriculum should help students discover the wonders of the created world,
- student activity should play a prominent role in the learning process,
- the curriculum should not only focus on the transfer of knowledge, but also shape the personality of students,
- the curriculum should emphasise the development of critical thinking,
- the methods and tools used should be appropriate for the age of the children, and the curriculum should allow for differentiation,
- the curriculum should support cooperation and provide opportunities for students to work together and engage in joint learning activities,
- the development of mother tongue competence is the responsibility of all subjects and all teachers (Feke, 2019).

The Reformed Pedagogical Institute supported the development of content in line with the above principles by developing and organising accredited teacher training courses. The professional implementation of the project was completed on 30 November 2022, and the Reformed Curriculum Development Group was dissolved in January 2023, but the completed content remains available to interested parties. (Refpedi)

Since 2022, it has been raised on several occasions and in several forums that the results of Reformed curriculum development could be widely used and that the Reformed education network needs further similar developments and ongoing support for content development. According to one of the working documents for the Reformed education strategy for the period 2026-2030, "The Reftantár and other religious teaching materials play an important role in identity formation, but the integration of the Reformed spirit into 'secular' subjects (e.g. history, literature) has not yet been widely addressed. There is a need for the consistent application of Christian values in the development of teaching materials. The development of Reformed textbooks and teaching materials is currently fragmented and often does not correspond to the curriculum content required by NAT2020, which causes tension in everyday education." ("RefHáló" Quality of Education, Added Pedagogical Value Working Group Working Document 2025)

The formulation and practical application of a specifically Reformed education and teaching system also poses problems in higher education. Although there is considerable overlap between the circle of experts involved in the development of Reformed teaching materials and the teaching staff involved in Reformed teacher training, it cannot be said that a clearly defined content and approach that would promote a mutually fruitful relationship between Reformed public education and teacher training.

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSES

Some of the organisational challenges listed above were already addressed in the 2018 strategy (e.g. more conscious, data-driven institution establishment and takeovers). Zsuzsanna M. Császár already stated in 2017 that it is important to develop the vocational school network and boarding schools, and that special attention should be paid to the introduction and implementation of programmes to help various disadvantaged groups (M. Császár, 2017). Two basic conditions must be met for well-founded strategic decisions: (1) valid, research-based socio-geographical and statistical data must be available to inform the decision, (2) there must be clear procedures, conditions and decision-making mechanisms for maintenance/establishment decisions. The second condition must be created and applied in practice by the church administration at the time. The first condition requires a professionally autonomous knowledge centre that is independent of direct decision-making forums and (1) is able to determine the scope of data necessary for decision-making, (2) has the appropriate authority to obtain and process this data, (3) is able to present the data obtained in a multi-faceted, scientifically sound manner that is easily understandable to decision-makers. The establishment of the organisational framework for this knowledge centre is the responsibility and competence of the maintaining church, but the human resources and knowledge assets of the university sector – primarily Reformed higher education – appear to be indispensable for the professional work. It is important to coordinate the activities of the knowledge centre with the characteristics of scientific research, but it should not be forgotten that the research and data analysis carried out here are not controlled by one or other autonomous higher education institution, but by an organisation (knowledge centre) under the direct control of the Synod or indirectly through the Education Service. This model provides opportunities for cooperation between several scientific workshops, research groups or researchers, as well as for comparing results and proposals.

In order to protect students' career paths, it is important to develop an information network within and beyond the public education system. With regard to the Reformed institutional network, organisational integration is ensured, the dominance of secondary education has ceased, and in terms of the number of institutions, the system is no longer an inverted pyramid, as it appeared at the turn of the millennium. (Pusztai, 2020, p. 40) However, voluntary and ad hoc links between different school levels must be replaced by organised cooperation based on geographical location and training profiles. The Base Institution Network established by the Reformed Pedagogical Institute in 2018 provides a good basis for this.

By further developing the base institution network and improving its organisation, significant potential for cooperation can be created. In addition to the public education network, the nursery network and higher education institutions also need to be involved in this cooperation network. Conscious career guidance should be provided to support Reformed students in their educational pathways, from nursery school through primary and secondary school to higher education, where appropriate. It is also worth utilising the know-how of higher education in this activity, if only because training includes infant and early childhood education, kindergarten teacher training, primary school teacher training and teacher training, and the associated network of training institutions, which can also be a good starting point for promoting networking. An informal but increasingly intensive professional network of institution leaders and teachers can be created based on the model and experience of the Károli Junior Academy. (KRE KJA)

Mutual understanding of the experiences and needs of different levels of institutions can provide positive feedback for institutional and inter-institutional training development, whether in terms

of implementing training that better meets the expectations of the next level of education or developing a training portfolio that meets the needs of the previous level.

STAFFING RESPONSES

As explained in the previous point, we see networking and organised knowledge sharing as one of the most important keys to systematic development. The basic unit of this networking is obviously the creation of a sufficiently dense, interlinked system of institutions, but its effective functioning is inconceivable without a conscious personnel policy and the establishment and strengthening of common professional and spiritual foundations for those employed in the network. One of the most important – and currently underutilised – areas for strengthening these professional and spiritual foundations is the training of new professionals. It is the eminent task of denominational higher education institutions to support the strengthening of the social and educational role of churches with professionals and supporting the functioning of church organisations with their multiplying and diversifying functions with specialists. (Pusztai, 2020, p. 176)

Pedagogical work tailored to the specific characteristics of denominational public education can draw on three sources at the level of the individual teacher these are (1) personal faith and inner commitment to religious education, (2) personal experiences gained as a student in the denominational institutional system, and (3) theoretical and practical knowledge acquired in denominational teacher training. Ideally, these three factors should be organically intertwined and complementary, but in our experience this is very rare. At the systemic level, the church maintainer has a direct influence on the third factor. This influence can be exerted in three ways. As a first prerequisite, (1) it must ensure that there are enough places in Reformed teacher training to meet the needs of the public education network (naturally taking into account students coming from outside the network and those who will eventually find employment outside it). With regard to the provision of places, efforts should be made to ensure that the widest possible range of specialist teacher training is represented in the higher education system. On the other hand, without compromising university autonomy, but (2) with a strong emphasis on ensuring that the attitude, curriculum and pedagogical approach of Reformed higher education institutions are in line with the spirit of Christian education and prepare students for a professional role in denominational public education. In denominational teacher training, teachers must help students who will themselves become Christian teachers to develop (De Muynck et al., 2019). The establishment of a network of training institutions plays a key role in this endeavour. According to current practice, only a small proportion of students in Reformed teacher training are able to complete their teaching practice in Reformed (or at least denominational) institutions. Efforts should be made – if necessary, through organisational, internal legislation and/or scholarship payment solutions – to ensure that Reformed public education institutions accept Reformed teacher trainees for institutional practice within the limits of their capacity, and that training institutions give priority to practice carried out in Reformed institutions.

All these measures together can ensure the supply of high-quality professionals and the long-term self-sustainability of the Reformed public education network. If all elements of the network function effectively, a circular model of Reformed education can emerge, in which the primary source of new professionals is employees who appear at various levels of the network in the roles of students/pupils/parents and who become committed to the functioning of the network (including not only teachers with higher education degrees, but also kindergarten teachers with secondary education degrees, teaching assistants, administrative staff, and technical staff who have obtained

a basic education degree and found employment in the Reformed education network). In our model, the spirit and community of Reformed public education institutions develops organically in such a way that it requires little or no formal training or sensitisation for new employees. Every step taken towards professional and spiritual stability in the institutions strengthens their social impact, community-building and missionary role, which can lead to a continuous increase in the number and proportion of pupils, students and employees who voluntarily join and remain in the circular model. This mission has significant potential: currently, only slightly more than half of those who graduate from church teacher training programmes find employment in church institutions (Pusztai, 2020, p. 183).

We have also mentioned the issue of leadership training separately in our problem map. The Synod Council of the Reformed Church in Hungary, in its decision No. ZST-103/2016.1.214, ordered the creation of a Reformed Education Strategy. Point E4_2 of the completed strategy's vision states: *The head of a Reformed public education institution shall be a teacher with a professional qualification in Christian public education, in accordance with the legal timetable* (Ábrám, 2018). On this basis, preparatory work began, leading to the accreditation of a specialised further training course for Protestant public education leaders (Szontagh & Van der Vloed 2024, Szontagh 2024). In 2025, the Education Office deleted the specialised further training programme preparing for the Protestant public education leader professional examination in accordance with the changes to Government Decree 419/2024. (XII. 23.) on the system of continuing education for teachers, as of September 2025, only the Education Authority may continue to provide continuing education for the professional examination for Protestant public education leaders and training for public education institution leaders. However, the heads of Reformed public education institutions need to familiarise themselves with the specific characteristics of the institutional system, therefore, based on Decision 26/2025. (03.12.) ET, the four-semester specialised further training course for the professional examination for teachers, consisting of a professional module, must be transformed into a two-semester, 120-hour, 60-credit course that provides the specialised content. The further training course in Protestant public education institution development developed by the Faculty of Education of Károli Gáspár Reformed University has retained the content of the professional module of the previous further training course preparing for the professional examination for Protestant public education leaders and supplemented it with areas related to faith and Christian pedagogy. The training is expected to start in the 2025/2026 academic year.

MISSIONARY RESPONSES

From a missionary perspective, it is important to clarify that "all activities of the Reformed Church in Hungary must be fundamentally and essentially missionary in nature, or must assist and support the mission. Anything in the functioning of the Church that does not fit into this 'logic of salvation' is not only useless but actually harmful to the message of Christ's grace." (MRE MSZ)

As we have seen, the historical and community roots of Reformed public education institutions are very heterogeneous. This is also true of institutional religious life. The institutional life of faith can vary greatly, not only in terms of spiritual content but also in terms of organisational framework. Andrea Szászi and Anikó Bánné Mészáros conducted a survey in 2020 and published a very detailed analysis of their findings in the journal Magyar Református Nevelés (Hungarian Reformed Education). Without quoting their findings in detail, we would just like to point out that, according to the survey, there is no area in which there is complete agreement on what exactly the school chaplain's duties are. (Szászi & Bánné, 2020, p. 39) The synod regulation on school

chaplaincy (5/2024. (XII. 11.) *Synod Regulation of the Reformed Church in Hungary on Institutional Pastors in Public Education and Vocational Training*), which will come into force on 1 September 2025 and will set out in detail the legal status, duties and responsibilities of school chaplains. "The regulation urges kindergarten and school pastors to obtain additional qualifications within five years of starting their employment, as they often encounter challenges in educational institutions that cannot be prepared for in theology. These include problems affecting the mental health of young people (anxiety, abuse), which must be addressed during the mission." (Gál, 2025) The relationship between institutions and congregations is a particularly important element of the much-mentioned networking in this area. Religious education cannot be understood solely in relation to institutions, but only in connection with congregations. ("RefHáló" Faith Education, Content and Organisational Framework for Religious Education Working Group Working Document, 2025)

The participants and factors of systematic catechesis may include (1) families and family members of various ages and backgrounds who are involved in the congregation, (2) educational institutions maintained by the MRE: teachers, religious education teachers, catechists, school chaplains, other staff members, students and their family members, (3) various settings of congregational catechesis: state and other church-run educational institutions, including students who are not closely connected to the parish, (4) parish ministers (official and voluntary helpers) and (5) religious events in the parishes. (ibid.)

In our view, this catalogue also highlights the importance of Reformed higher education, primarily through training and further education, whether in the training of pastors, religious education teachers or teachers of religion. It is important that Protestant public education leadership training also focuses on the organisation of institutional religious life.

The above examples clearly show that some kind of professional balance is needed in a very heterogeneous institutional system. It is equally important for every institution to clarify the mission area in which it fulfils its mission. In Reformed public education, one can find both small schools in catch-up settlements and elite secondary schools in Buda. There are Reformed institutions in traditionally Calvinist regions as well as in Catholic or non-religious micro-environments. It is obvious that the educational, upbringing and religious missions of individual institutions occupying different places on this scale cannot be identical. It is the moral duty of every maintainer and institution to clarify its mission precisely and to review and revise it from time to time. Legal regulations can ensure that these are implemented and complied with, but real change and development can only come about through the transformation of institutional practices. The issue of sensitising congregations and maintainers should also be mentioned here. A special feature of the Reformed public education network is that while education and management at the institutional level are professional, and subject to qualifications, professional experience and multilateral supervision, the responsible managers and decision-makers of the ecclesiastical legal entities (mainly congregations) performing the tasks of maintenance do not receive any formal training for their tasks as maintainers, nor are any such training requirements imposed on them. On the one hand, this can lead (in unfavourable cases) to unprofessional decisions by the maintainer, and through this to legal problems or professional competitive disadvantages. On the other hand, it can strain the professional relationship between the maintainer and the head of the institution, making it unequal or tense. An important task for Reformed higher education in the medium term is to fill this professional vacuum and, at the same time, to create the legal framework for the mandatory introduction of training for maintainers in a step-by-step process.

CONTENT RESPONSES

As we have seen, one of the most striking features of the Reformed public education network is its fragmentation and the autonomy of its institutions and maintainers. This Protestant-rooted organisational element has countless advantages, the exploitation of which leads to professional and spiritual growth for our institutions. These include the organisation of training tailored to the needs and characteristics of the local community, direct human and fraternal relationships between all those involved in institutional life, and the aforementioned circular professional recruitment and alumni network. As László Bruckner, Director General of the MRE Education Service, put it, "in our case, the maintainers are predominantly congregations, which are much more 'enveloping' and consider the school's affairs to be their own through the involvement of local congregation members." (Joó, 2025) At the same time, there is a risk of deprofessionalisation and a loss of energy and knowledge resulting from the operation of parallel structures.

We are convinced that, while maintaining professional and organisational autonomy, it is necessary to concentrate some of the tasks of the maintainers (here we are thinking primarily of legal, administrative and economic issues), and there is an urgent need to establish a Reformed educational knowledge centre that can transform the knowledge and experience of the individual elements of the system into shared knowledge and experience. There are numerous organisations and institutions active in the field of Reformed education and training, whose work is governed by various legal frameworks and ecclesiastical and secular expectations. Cooperation between them, the exploitation of professional synergies and the elimination of duplication are currently sporadic. Creating synergies requires, first and foremost, coordinated cooperation. This could be catalysed by the planned establishment of a Reformed Education Knowledge Centre, which would be able to coordinate training, content development, research and development, and professional services in the fields of public education, catechesis and higher education. This knowledge centre could play a coordinating role for the entire network, linking existing resources and establishing and operating information channels. The four most important areas of its operation are: (1) public education pedagogical and professional services (based on EMMI Decree 48/2012), (2) catechetical professional services and specialist counselling (based on Synod regulations), (3) content and training development (digital and analogue), (4) research and development (coordination of professional tenders, support for research- and data-based decision-making, pedagogical innovation). It can be established in two ways: (1) as an umbrella organisation responsible for coordinating existing autonomous educational actors and organisations to be established in the future, or (2) by expanding the tasks and powers of the Reformed Pedagogical Institute and restructuring its basic organisation and content. ("RefHáló" Teacher Training and Continuing Education, Leadership Training Working Group Working Document, 2025)

From the perspective of teacher training and research-based decision-making in the education sector, it is also crucial to train and integrate education scientists committed to the Reformed tradition. – this could be achieved by establishing a doctoral school of education within Reformed higher education, possibly in cooperation with the two higher education institutions currently operating in the field of teacher training (KRE, DRHE). Talented students participating in Reformed teacher training would thus be able to receive scholarships during their training, participate in research and become potential candidates for doctoral programmes, ensuring the next generation of scholars in this field. The programme of such a doctoral school should focus on the specific characteristics of Reformed institutions conduct research that supports research- and data-based decision-making in Reformed education, while also ensuring the next generation of

Reformed university teachers and researchers and strengthening the Reformed perspective at this level of education. (ibid.)

CONCLUSION

As we've tried to show above, the social embeddedness of Reformed teacher training in higher education isn't just a community idea, but a series of practical actions and strategies that serve the mission of the Reformed Church, the development of its educational network, and the development of the Reformed educational subsystem. and a series of strategic decisions that simultaneously serve the mission of the Reformed Church, the development of the educational network it maintains, the supply of professionals to the Reformed educational subsystem, and, through all of these, the entire domestic educational system and, indirectly, Hungarian society as a whole. The Hungarian Reformed Church's strategy and action plan for the development of its public education and vocational training network for the period 2026-2030 ("RefHáló") has set itself no less a goal than to serve this mission (Joó, 2025).

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