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Exam Leaks May Lead to Inquiry

By Natalya Krainova

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Putin discussing the state of secondary education in Russia.

The Education Ministry has asked law enforcement agencies to examine a leak onto the Internet of answers to the Unified State Exam currently being taken by Russian students in their last year of secondary school, Education Minister Dmitry Livanov told President Vladimir Putin at a meeting Thursday.

Livanov's declaration comes on the heels of a string of media reports over the past week citing multiple cases of cheating by students taking the series of standardized tests on various fundamental school subjects.

The minister met with the president Thursday to report on the general progress of secondary education reform. Apart from information on the Unified State Exam, Livanov noted that the growth of teachers' salaries this year and that the planned introduction of a dress code for school students starting Sept. 1, in line with a new umbrella law regulating education in the country that also takes effect that day.

Livanov said the average monthly salary of a school teacher grew by 26 percent in the first quarter of 2013 compared to the same period last year and amounted to 26,300 rubles ($820).

"This is very serious growth," Livanov said, Interfax reported. Other school employees saw their salaries grow by 50 percent this year.

Putin reiterated that education was a priority for state investment and that teachers' salaries could therefore be higher than in other professions. He also said their salaries must be raised annually.

Showing off his attention to detail, Putin ordered Livanov to ensure that teachers' salaries don't go down at the end of the year, after some regional authorities last year underpaid teachers in the third and fourth quarters due to financial constraints.

"You mustn't forget that people will need to live in the fourth and third quarters, too, and provide a decent level of salary," Putin said.

Ahead of Thursday's meeting, state newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta published an interview with Livanov in which the minister said Russia's education system will be "radically revitalized" in five years.

Livanov was appointed to his position last May, but large swaths of parliament and the public have long been seeking his dismissal because he has implemented unpopular reforms. This has led some observers to speculate that the recent leak of answers to the Unified State Exam was aimed at dealing another blow to Livanov's reputation.

On Thursday, the ministry announced the appointment of Anastasia Zyryanova as director of the ministry's department for general education, who, among other things, will supervise the drafting of legislation that will regulate the procedure for conducting the Unified State Exam.

To avoid leaks about the questions on the exam, next year the ministry will prepare unique questions for faraway regions, Deputy Education Minister Igor Remorenko told Dozhd television late Wednesday, RIA Novosti reported.

The ministry will also set up a database of questions for the Unified State Exam in all subjects within two years, Livanov told Putin on Thursday.

On May 27, the first day of the exam this year, answers to the Russian language test were leaked onto the Internet, and on May 29, on the eve of the tests in history, biology and computer science, the answers to those appeared on the Internet as well.

Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets has promised "worthy punishment" to those who posted the exam answers online, although she said some of the answers were fake, Interfax reported.

On Wednesday, Vladimir Burmatov, a State Duma deputy with the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, asked Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to examine the latest leaks of exam answers, saying the Education Ministry and Federal Service for Monitoring Education should be held responsible.

"This is an absolutely corrupt scheme when some official sells these materials to intermediaries, while the latter cash in further by selling them to school students," Burmatov said in comments carried by Interfax. Burmatov has been one of Livanov's most vociferous critics in the Duma.

The Unified State Exam was introduced nationwide in 2009 to replace school graduation exams and university entrance exams. It was also designed to reduce corruption in the university admissions process and to provide equal opportunities to university applicants from big cities and far-flung areas.

But critics have said the introduction of the exam has decreased the quality of secondary education, which they say has been reduced to teaching students only enough knowledge to answer the tests' questions, instead of giving them a broad-based education.

"It is very important for us that studies in upper grades won't be preparation for the Unified State Exam [per se], but that as the result of the studies, if a person did them responsibly and in a quality manner, he would be prepared for the exam," Livanov said at Thursday's meeting.

According to a poll released by the independent Levada Center on Thursday, 30 percent of Russians believe the Unified State Exam has lead to the growth of corruption in education. However, 34 percent think the exam hasn't influenced corruption, and 13 percent say the exam has reduced it.

The survey was conducted in late May among 1,600 hundred Russians in 45 regions. The survey's margin of error is 3.4 percentage points.

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