

An Assessment of the Situation in the Swedish School System 2013 by the Swedish National Agency for Education

The Swedish school system faces serious challenges. In order to deal with them, the Swedish National Agency for Education has highlighted three major development areas for its 2013 assessment:

- All schools must be developed into good schools.
- Ensure supply of competent teachers.
- Schools and education providers need long-term conditions.

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Foreword

The Swedish government commissioned the Swedish National Agency for Education to perform a general assessment of the situation and development in preschool, school and adult education every other year. This is an extract from the report *An Assessment of the Situation in the Swedish school system 2013 by the Swedish National Agency for Education*, which was published in Swedish in May 2013.

The Swedish National Agency for Education hopes that the assessment will serve as a basis for the national policy and the local development efforts by the education providers and schools. The report was prepared by Anne-Marie Lindström, Jessica Lindvert, Åsa Nordström and Camilla Thinsz Fjellström.

The Swedish National Agency for Education, May 2013

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The general assessment by the Swedish National Agency for Education

School is, in many ways, in focus in the Swedish public debate. Issues which have been highlighted include declining educational results, growing segregation in schools, for-profit schools, teacher registration, teachers' working situation, fair grading and the right to schooling for 'paperless' immigrant children. The international discussion on schools is characterised by the economic crisis and its consequences. Within both the EU and OECD, education is generally seen as the way to increased employment and economic recovery. Another central issue in the international context is how education can help people deal with an unpredictable future; critical thinking, initiative-taking, problem-solving and cooperation are abilities which are considered to be indispensable.¹

The general picture of performance in the Swedish compulsory school remains a cause for concern. The international studies presented by the Swedish National Agency for Education in 2012 demonstrated declining results in mathematics for Swedish pupils in the 8th grade, as well as in reading comprehension for the 4th graders. For Swedish 4th graders, the level for maths remains unchanged compared to the average for the EU/OECD countries. The same applies to the level of the 8th graders in natural sciences.² The good news is that performance in natural science improved (for the first time since the beginning of the 2000s) for the 4th graders, and also that the Swedish 9th graders showed top level in English in the first extensive studies on modern languages.

1 See, inter alia, Communication from the European Commission (2012) *Rethinking education strategy*; OECD (2012) *OECD Skills Strategy Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives*. See also <http://skills.oecd.org/>

2 Neither in PIRLS, nor in TIMSS can the general deterioration be attributed to pupils from immigrant families.

An unprecedented number of children attended preschool in the autumn of 2012, and the number of pupils in compulsory school has increased for the second year in a row, following a decrease which lasted several years. Two out of ten children attending preschool go to independent preschools and just over 13 per cent of pupils in compulsory school go to independent schools. Every fourth upper secondary school pupil attends an independent school.

Due to a diminished population base there is currently a decreasing number of pupils in upper secondary school. The decrease in upper secondary school enrolment has so far mostly affected municipal schools, but currently the proportion of pupils enrolling in the first year of independent upper secondary school is also decreasing.³ The number of course participants in municipal adult education has also increased in recent years, and the number of students enrolled in Swedish as a second language (sfi) doubled between 2005 and 2011.

The Swedish school system faces serious challenges. In order to deal with them, the Swedish National Agency for Education has highlighted three major development areas for its 2013 assessment. The Agency believes that these development areas are of major importance in order to reverse the negative trend.

- **All schools must be developed into good schools**
- **Ensure supply of competent teachers**
- **Schools and education providers need long-term conditions**

The development areas are not one-off projects, but rather parts of a systematic school development work meant to ensure that the Swedish education system provides high quality, achieves high results and maintains equity.

3 In its report *Mapping the School Market* (2012) the Swedish National Agency for Education presented a summary of a number of studies, which highlight various aspects of the increased market adjustment within the school sector.

All schools must be developed into good schools

The first development area the Agency would like to highlight is that all schools and education programmes must be developed so that they maintain high quality. All children and pupils should be provided with support and stimulation, so that they develop to the best of their abilities, regardless of their background or the school they attend. The school should strive to compensate for the different backgrounds of various students, but it has not managed to give the pupils sufficient support in their development. The deviation in the students' performance has increased and there is still a strong connection between socio-economic background and how pupils succeed in school. Over the last two decades the differences among the average performances in various compulsory schools have doubled, while being originally small from an international perspective. Only a proportion of the increased difference in results between schools can be explained by increased school segregation with regard to the socioeconomic composition of pupils. On the other hand, the schools seem to be becoming increasingly different with respect to such qualities as students' motivation to study. Peer effects and teachers' expectations can be expected to increase the differences between schools, which means that it has become increasingly important which school a student attends. The Agency believes that the equity level has deteriorated.⁴

The school choice reform has most probably contributed to the increased differences between schools. The Agency sees the free school choice and the school market as a true dilemma. Each individual pupil and their parents now have increased possibility to choose the school they believe is the best for the child, and there are plenty of schools to choose from. At the same time the choice

4 The Swedish National Agency for Education (2012) *Likvärdig utbildning i svensk grundskola?*; the increased differences between schools in Sweden are emphasised in OECD (2013) PISA in Focus 27.

of school implies an action which can negatively affect pupils whose parents do not make an active choice. As far as society is concerned, the choice of schools can contribute to the schools reviewing their operation to increase quality, but it can also weaken preconditions necessary to provide each student with equal education.

The increased differences in performance by schools call for strong measures at national and municipal level in order to maintain equity in the school system.

In its new synthesis report *Education today 2013* the OECD emphasises that the available choice can stimulate quality, but can at the same time constitute a risk of reduced equity. Measures are required to balance the opportunities offered by the school choice with its negative consequences for equity. For example, it is necessary to take measures to enable all pupils and their parents to make an informed choice. The OECD believes that a relatively costly option is to invest heavily in disadvantaged schools on the expectation that educational measures (whether in the form of better teachers, smaller classes or more remedial help) can improve outcomes even under unfavourable conditions. A different policy choice involves attempting to reduce the degree of concentration through school choice or housing policy. A more balanced social mix in schools would, according to the OECD, significantly contribute to improve outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁵

The increased differences among schools attract attention to the development potential, which exists in the pupils' learning environment, primarily in the form of competent and committed teachers. Numerous measures at national level are currently being carried out to ensure a high level of teaching in all schools. Many of them are general in nature (teacher registration, new syllabus, auxiliary materials and competence development measures, such as the "mathematics boost", an educational program for math teachers). The Agency believes that continued measures will be required to ensure that all schools can be developed into good schools.

5 OECD (2012) *Education Today 2013*, p.101–111.

Equity is also a responsibility of the education providers. Resources in the form of remedial help and competent teachers are not always placed where they are most needed. In its earlier reports the Agency has demonstrated that compensatory contributions in resource distribution are insufficient. To offset the increasing differences among the pupils and schools, education providers need clearer strategic use of available resources. The group composition is also an important issue, since peer effects and teachers' expectations can increase differences between schools. Education in its turn must be structured in such way that all pupils, regardless of their group composition, feel that teachers believe in their ability.

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The decreased equity level needs to be taken seriously. In international comparisons, Sweden distinguishes itself as a country where both student performance and equity have declined during the 2000s. The Agency believes that further strong measures are required to increase equity.

The school choice reform has probably contributed to the increasing performance differences between schools and thus to decreased equity. The school system has undergone significant changes since the introduction of the school choice reform, but its consequences have not been analysed as a whole. The Agency believes that the government ought to analyse how the school choice system can be reconciled with increased equity, so that all schools develop into good schools.

Municipal and independent education providers are also responsible for equity. Resources in the form of remedial help to students, competent teachers and principals must be placed where they are needed most. To compensate for the increasing differences among both pupils and schools, education providers must more consciously use the available resources and otherwise strive to achieve better equity.

The Agency intends to support the education providers, teachers and principals in their work of developing all schools into good schools. The Agency will also follow up and assess the equity level.

Ensure supply of competent teachers

Another development area the Agency would like to highlight is an assured supply of competent teachers.

The future supply of teachers and preschool teachers is threatened. High retirement rates are to be expected, Swedish teachers are less satisfied with their choice of occupation than on average in other EU/OECD countries, more and more teachers think about changing their profession, students with good grades do not choose education in pedagogical professions, and long term forecasts predict a shortage of teachers and preschool teachers. There is some good news in that interest for teacher training is increasing and that those teachers who receive support from their principals are more satisfied with their choice of career.

Recurring signals indicate that pedagogical management is not given sufficient priority and that other tasks take up most of the principal's time. The principal's awareness of the daily school routine, clarity in pedagogical management and the ability to communicate and promote the school's goals are prerequisites for a well-functioning school.⁶

The way teaching is conducted is decisive for pupil's educational success, and, unlike the pupils socio-economic background, is something the school can influence. The Agency does not see any fast and simple ways to make all schools good schools. Pupil success builds upon a combination of individual efforts and guidance by competent, motivating teachers who constantly adjust his or her teaching to the educational development of his or her pupils.⁷

6 The Swedish Research Council (2011) *Rektor – En forskningsöversikt 2000–2010*.

7 Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible learning*; the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) *What influences Educational Achievement in Swedish Schools?*; Håkansson, J. & D. Sundberg (2012) *Utmärkt undervisning.*; the Swedish National Agency for Education (2012) *Högpresterande elever, höga prestationer och undervisningen i de internationella studierna PIRLS, PISA och TIMSS, forskning och utvärdering.*

To ensure a high standard of teaching, a professional teaching staff is needed, which is able, within the framework of the school's policy document, to adjust the teaching style to the needs of each particular pupil.⁸ The teachers' responsibility for the professional content delivered in class has been reinforced by the new Education Act, which stipulates that education must be based on scientific premise and proven experience.⁹ The Agency views positively that the state has allocated increased funds for the dissemination of research and also believes that continued support must be given to teaching-related research of high quality.

The Agency believes that a basic principle in the discussion of the teachers' daily work should be that teachers need to use their time to enhance pupils' knowledge development. For teachers to be able to carry out high quality teaching, they must have time for planning of lessons and for assessment of pupils' work. They must also have time to analyse and document pupils' knowledge development and provide feedback on pupils' development to both pupils and their parents. The Agency's national study of how compulsory school teachers use their time shows that teachers spend about as much time teaching as they were expected to before the regulated teaching load was abolished in 2000.

While new tasks have been added since then in the form of documentation, administration, contacts with parents, concerns for the pupils' health and psycho-social environment, there is nothing to suggest that the previous tasks have been removed, or that the school now offers new or more extensive support functions.¹⁰

The Agency believes, and such view is widely supported by the educational research, that teaching profits from teachers' joint plan-

8 Schools Inspectorate points out that there are deficiencies in individual adjustment of the process based on the children's and pupils' backgrounds and needs in almost all types of processes and schools. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012) *En skola med tilltro lyfter alla elever*.

9 Chapter 1, Paragraph 5 of the Education Act.

10 The Swedish National Agency for Education (2013) *Lärarnas yrkesvardag*.

ning.¹¹ However, the Agency's time study shows that compulsory school teachers normally work alone. There is also strong support for the view that competence development for principals, preschool directors, preschool teachers and teachers which takes place in a regular teaching environment together with colleagues enhances the whole school's development work more than individual efforts.¹²

There are both structural and cultural conditions in school which make working alone a norm for teachers. That is why it is important that the state, the education providers, principals and teachers create the basis for collegial collaboration. For example, the education providers are responsible for providing well thought-out timetabling and appropriate premises for collaboration. Singapore and Finland have consciously invested in allowing teachers to develop their teaching process; the teachers are offered more education and receive continuous feedback. The ongoing state-supported educational programmes for teachers, "the mathematics boost" (matematiklyftet) and "counselling for learning" (handledning för lärande), are based on the principles of collegial learning and on the insights of these methods. The national programmes meant to promote the teaching profession are important – new teacher education, teacher registration¹³, induction period, competency profiles, lecturer grade, advanced teachers (förstelärare), "boost for teachers" (läraryftet) and campaigns for teachers. The state needs to be consistent in its support to make sure these measures result in their intended effects. The education providers need to assure and implement measures to be able to employ and keep teachers with proper competence. Last but not the least, the induction period is important in this context. For the education providers the registration reform means that they

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- 11 Miles, K. & L. Darling-Hammond (1998) "Rethinking the allocations of teaching resources.;" Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible learning*.
 - 12 Håkansson, J. & D. Sundberg (2012) *Skolförbättringsarbete.*; Hargreaves, A. (2003) *Teaching in the knowledge society*; Timperley, H. (2011) *Realizing the power of professional learning.*; Mouwitz, L. (2001) *Hur kan lärare lära?*
 - 13 On 31 March 2013 the Agency announced about 90,000 registrations. 136,000 applications had arrived as of the same date.

must also take stock of continuing education needs so as to ensure future teacher support.

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It is important that the education providers increase their efforts to support the provision of competence by schools. The education providers must do more to recruit and keep teachers with the correct competence. The education providers and schools must create conditions that would enable teachers to take on responsibility for the professional content delivered in class. At this point a number of state-supported reforms are being implemented in order to ensure supply of skilled and competent teachers. The Agency believes that these reforms will need consistent state support, if they are expected to produce lasting improvement and enable the continuous assumption of responsibility by the education providers.

The Agency intends to keep supporting the education providers, teachers and principals, by disseminating research relevant to teaching and creating competence development measures to support high quality in teaching.

Schools and education providers need long-term conditions

It is no easy task to implement a work of change so that future school operations will, to a great extent give pupils the possibility to develop to the best of their abilities – both those who need support/remedial help to reach the required level, and to those who do so easily. A third development area the Agency would once again like to highlight is the need for systematic and long-term support to schools and education providers.

Considerable changes are underway in preschool, school and adult education. The teaching is conducted according to new course syllabus, curriculums and subject syllabus, grades are being given for the first time by the teachers in the 6th grade. Newly graduated teachers are going through induction periods, many tenured teachers and principals are taking part in further training and more national tests are being introduced. On the whole, there are plenty of measures underway, with many players involved.

Schools and preschools need forward planning and stable frameworks to cope with the challenges faced by the Swedish school system today. New deficit areas must of course be followed by new measures. The Agency believes that a lot can be gained from additional measures introduced in conjunction with those already on-going. The outcomes so far of the Agency's implementation measures suggest that the national steering documents have been made known and established. The Agency believes there is a comprehensive need for continued state support of reforms and is following up the development in order to identify problems and adjust support as necessary. The state needs to be active, not just in respect of implementation assistance, but also in respect of following up and assessing the reforms.

To monitor and counteract any undesired effects is an important task for the state – for example, a reduced choice of upper secondary school programmes in certain districts. It is also important to

improve communication among various actors which support the school system, so that the measures complement each other and intentions are clear for those who work within the school system.

Research emphasises the fact that effective school development must be characterised by systematic and forward-thinking processes with just a few prioritised goals.¹⁴ A recurring criticism in the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's scrutinies is the fact that all too many principals and education providers have deficiencies in their mapping of schools' strengths and weaknesses.¹⁵

The OECD points out in its recent study of the Swedish education system that the system certainly demonstrates a satisfactory amount of assessment and evaluation at various levels, but that the challenge for Sweden is to unite these parts into a whole.¹⁶

The education providers require continued governmental support to be able to assume responsibility for the local school development. The Agency would like to emphasise the education providers' need for information on the overall school mission. As the Agency showed in one of its studies, many education providers work their way between parallel expectations from on one side, municipal management in the form of key figures for annual targets and the budget documents, and on the other side national requirements, in the form of curriculum and course syllabus.¹⁷ These management systems need to be more coordinated. The Agency intends to strengthen the dialogue between the state and the education providers with the purpose of creating better conditions for the education providers to assume responsibility for the overall school mission.¹⁸

14 Timperley, H. (2011) *Realizing the power of professional learning*.

15 The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012) *En skola med tilltro lyfter alla elever*.

16 OECD (2011) *OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Sweden 2011*.

17 The Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) *Kommunalt huvudmannaskap i praktiken*.

18 Internationally this is often called *capacity building*.

The responsibility for quality development rests mostly at local level. A challenge for the state input is thus the heterogeneity of various education providers. There are significant differences in capacity at education provider level, certain education providers are large municipal organisations responsible for tens of thousands of pupils, while others run schools with a handful of pupils. The Agency has long been aware of the fact that certain education providers and schools have fewer possibilities to take part in the state measures. It has become a pattern that small municipal education providers and independent education providers participate less often.¹⁹ Since this pattern has been observed for several years, there is a risk of growing differences. In order to protect equity, the Agency believes that the principle, which has thus far been applicable to state development measures (which are normally meant for the whole country), needs to be expanded.²⁰ When necessary, the measures should also henceforth be aimed at specific education providers and schools.²¹

19 See, for example, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) *Redovisning av uppdrag att utvärdera statsbidraget för basfärdigheterna läsa, skriva och räkna.*; The Swedish National Agency for Education (2010) *En uppföljning om hinder och möjligheter att delta i Lärarfortbildningen.*

20 Prop. 2007/08:50 demonstrates that the national development measures may be motivated by the responsibility for equity in the country and be based on the nationally identified needs. In the goal and performance oriented school system, the quality development at the local level shall be mostly the responsibility of each education provider, school and organization.

21 Such as the currently implemented measure to support schools in socially disadvantaged areas. U2011/6863/S.

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The government must ensure that the education providers and schools are provided with long-term conditions for their local development work. It is also necessary to follow up the reforms on a regular basis, assess them and adjust them to offset undesired effects. On-going implementation requires continued assistance, and to the extent new measures are initiated, they must support the on-going measures as much as possible. Since various education providers and schools have different conditions, the government must consider which specifically adjusted efforts might be necessary.

It is also necessary to provide measures which would create a better basis for the education providers to assume responsibility for the overall school mission. The education providers must do more to assume general responsibility for the school, and systematically work towards increasing quality.

The Agency intends to strengthen the dialogue between the state and the education providers in order to create a better basis for the education providers to assume responsibility for the overall school mission. The Agency also intends to assist with on-going follow up and assessment.

Preparedness to a changed application pattern

In addition to the three main development areas, the Agency draws attention to upper secondary school. Since 2007 the proportion of pupils enrolled in upper secondary school studies in vocational programmes has been constantly decreasing. The largest change came in connection with the introduction of the new upper secondary school in the autumn of 2011.

In the autumn of 2012 six out of ten pupils enrolled in upper secondary schools under a higher education preparatory program, just under three out of ten enrolled in a vocational program, and 14 per cent enrolled in one of the five introduction programmes. The higher education preparatory programmes have so far been the most attractive options. Combined with demographically small age cohorts, the reduced proportion of pupils who choose vocational programmes carries the risk of insufficient supply of competence to certain occupations. The wishes and interests of pupils should be the most important factors for their choice of the upper secondary school programme. It is important, however, to make sure that pupils do not avoid some programmes because they fear low education quality or because they have received insufficient information about the programme. It is therefore important to ensure high quality of all upper secondary school programmes, including workplace training, and to offer good study and career guidance. It is difficult to predict the number of applicants per place, choice of programmes and change of programmes in the new upper secondary school. At the same time, the Agency believes that the government and education providers need to pay increased attention to certain issues due to the application pattern observed in recent years. This includes, for example, making sure that students who need support to reach their goals receive it. It also concerns the capacity to offer a wide spectrum of vocational programmes and pay attention to the needs of the local

job market. Further focus may be needed in respect of higher vocational training as an additional way to the job market.

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The education providers and schools must have the necessary preparedness to deal with changed application patterns in respect of various upper secondary school programmes, including their consequences for teaching and remedial resources.

The education providers and schools must assist the pupils in their choice of upper secondary school programme by providing factual and objective information.

The Agency intends to provide factual and objective information on various study programmes, support work with study and careers guidance, and follow the development in application patterns with respect to upper secondary school.