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# Municipal responsibility in practice

A qualitative study



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# **Municipal responsibility in practice**

A qualitative study



## Foreword

Statistical presentations and evaluations by the National Agency for Education have shed light on the inadequate attainment of goals in the Swedish school system. The Agency has deepened this analysis by means of a study consisting of interviews with some of those responsible for schools in the municipalities.

This report presents the results of the study. The aim of the report is to capture the perspectives of the responsible authorities and to demonstrate specific fundamental problems at the intersection of national governance and municipal self-government. The report describes how municipalities perceive and manage their assignment of ensuring that the municipal school system follows the national guidelines and achieves the national goals.

The study is qualitative. The empirical data in the study consists of interviews with the three highest political offices in charge of the school system, (the Chair of the Municipal Assembly, the Chair of the Municipal Executive Committee, and the Chair of the Education Committee), and the two most senior administrative officers, (the Municipal Chief Executive and the Head of the Education Department) in eight municipalities.

This report is aimed at municipal politicians and heads of municipal departments, as well as individual principal organisers of independent schools. It may also serve as a basis for discussion among education professionals and various parent groups.

The project group at the National Agency for Education consisted of Gunnar Iselau (project manager), Martin Bennulf, Karin Bäckbro and Sandra Mardones Larsson. The group has received valuable input from Professor Stig Montin of the School of Public Administration at the University of Gothenburg.

The National Agency for Education, December 2011

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## Summary

Annual follow-ups by the National Agency for Education show that significant numbers of pupils do not achieve the basic national knowledge goals. This means that, year after year, there is a proportion of pupils who are not given the prerequisites for development and learning to which they are entitled by law and regulation.

The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of what responsible authorities do, and of their influence on goal attainment in the school system, by shedding light on the way in which municipal organisers exercise their responsibility for schools.

The study is qualitative and aims to capture the perspectives of responsible authorities and some specific fundamental problems at the intersection of national governance and municipal self-government. It gives examples of how municipalities, in their role of responsible authority, perceive and manage their assignment to ensure that the municipal school system follows the national guidelines and achieves the national goals.

The empirical data in the study consists of interviews with the three highest political offices in charge of the school system, (the Chair of the Municipal Assembly, Chair of the Municipal Executive Committee and the Chair of the Education Committee) and the two most senior officials (the Municipal Chief Executive and the Head of the Education Department) in eight municipalities. The interviews have been analysed against the background of relevant Acts and Ordinances, statistical data and research findings in the field. The interviews were conducted in late 2009 and early 2010.

According to the Education Act, it is the municipality's highest executive body that has the municipal authority's responsibility for the school system. This means that it is the municipal assembly, and in practice its drafting body, the municipal executive committee, that receive the assignment from central government. It is thus the political leadership of the municipality that is *responsible* for the school system's achievement of the national goals and requirements levels. According to the Local Government Act and the Education Act, a municipal assembly is to appoint one or more committees to *discharge* central government assignments relating to the school system. In this way, such a committee is accountable for the school system to the municipal assembly, which as responsible authority is in turn accountable to central government.

The central government instructions to increase goal attainment in the school system have not had sufficient impact. This may in part be viewed in the context of the way municipalities interpret and manage their mission to

organise schools. The patterns and problem scenarios presented in this study can be summarised in the following conclusions:

1. The eight municipalities demonstrate a lack of clarity on how to manage the role of responsible authority. It is often delegated to a committee or department. However, it is unclear how this delegated responsibility is governed and followed up by municipal leaderships and how feedback occurs. For this reason, it is common for the subordinate level to find it difficult to broach shortcomings and problems relating to the national mission.
2. There are indications that the municipal leadership does not approach the running of school education as a single integrated assignment from central government. The central government objectives for schools are sometimes seen as long-term visions, not as objectives to be fulfilled. Some central government requirements are not prioritised in the municipal management of these objectives, with the result that national goals are disregarded and nationally set objectives lowered. In addition, resources are allocated in a standardised manner rather than being based on an analysis of local conditions and needs with a view to achieving the national goals.

Overall, the study has shown how municipalities' interpretation of their role as responsible authority can prevent them from acting to increase equitability and significantly improve goal attainment in schools. There is a significant lack of clarity regarding division of responsibility, governance and follow-up. This hampers interaction between department, committee and municipal leadership. Governance tends to be more one-sided in favour of certain key ratios and comparisons. This may help to explain the persistent shortcomings in such basic prerequisites for school quality as the head teacher's leadership skills, teacher qualifications, teaching quality and resource allocation based on different schools' needs.

National governance in the form of goals, laws and ordinances is extensive in more areas than just school education. This study has not covered the full range of central government requirements – are these requirements reasonable, coordinated, supported by the stakeholders? The study does not address the question of whether the same problem scenarios are found in other operational areas. Despite the limitations of this study, the National Agency for Education hopes that the scenarios and fundamental dilemmas presented in this report will provide a basis for greater understanding of specific fundamental problems at the intersection of national governance and municipal self-government.

# Introduction

## Background

Annual studies by the National Agency for Education show that significant numbers of pupils do not achieve the basic national educational goals. This means that there is a significant number of pupils who are not given the prerequisites for development and learning they are entitled to by law and regulation. There may of course be several reasons for this. This study sheds light on the way responsible authorities interpret and manage the assignment given to them by the state.

Studies conducted by the National Agency for Education in the mid-1990s found that the role of the municipality as responsible authority was not functioning as expected. As early as 1993, the Agency established that there were problems in the municipal governance of schools and commented that it was “of the utmost importance that the focus laid down by the Riksdag with regard to governance and responsibility for schools be clarified and respected”.<sup>1</sup> Based on its highlighting of serious shortcomings in the municipal exercise of responsibility, the Agency designed an action plan and invited municipalities to take part in deliberations.<sup>2</sup> As part of the action plan, the Agency published a pamphlet, “Responsibility for Schools”, which was primarily intended for municipal politicians.<sup>3</sup> In 1999, two different reports by the Agency found that “municipal responsibility for schools has been fragmented across different groups and different levels of responsibility”<sup>4</sup> and that “it seems rather to be the case that the school system is functional despite or independent of the intentions formulated at the political level”.<sup>5</sup>

In their reports, the National Agency for Education’s Educational Inspectorate and subsequently the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, have concluded that, despite repeated criticism, the same types of shortcoming persist in the school system from year to year. Although the National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate call attention every year to the fact that significant numbers of pupils do not attain “the minimum level of knowledge that

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1 National Agency for Education (1993). *Bilden av Skolan 1993*, p. 93.

2 National Agency for Education (1996a). *Kommunernas styrning och egenkontroll* p. 9, also described in National Agency for Education (1997a) *Ansvar för skolan – en kommunal utmaning*, p. 7.

3 National Agency for Education (1997a). *Ansvar för skolan – en kommunal utmaning*,

4 Blidberg, Kersti, Haldén, Eva & Wallin, Erik (1999). *Hur styr vi mot en bra skola?: [om skola och kommun i samverkan]*. Stockholm: National Agency for Education p. 32.

5 National Agency for Education (1999). *Skolpolitiker, eldsjälar och andra aktörer: hur styr kommunerna skolan?* Stockholm p. 58.

all pupils are to achieve”<sup>6</sup>, goals to be achieved in years 5 and 9, there does not appear to be a response in the municipalities such that the conditions for pupil learning significantly improve.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, in light of the National Agency for Education’s responsibility to promote equitability and goal attainment, there is a need to study how responsible authorities perceive and manage the central government’s requirements and calls for action, and to discuss the implications this may have for the capacity of schools to achieve the national goals.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of what responsible authorities do, and how they influence goal attainment in schools by showing how municipalities exercise their formal responsibility for schools.

Based on the perspectives of a number of individuals responsible for municipal activities, the study intends to show how the governance system can be perceived, with a particular focus on how responsible authorities exercise their responsibility. The study focuses on specific core issues within the governance system in the interface between national governance and municipal self-government. The study was not designed so that the observations can be generally applicable to all responsible authorities, but it aims to highlight patterns and problem scenarios that may also be relevant for municipalities not included in the study to reflect on and discuss. By showing how the governance system can be perceived, the aim is to increase knowledge about the system’s functionality. The results may serve as a basis for various types of discussion and efforts to increase equitability and quality in schools at both national and municipal level.

## Method

Responsible authorities for schools may be municipalities, county councils and, for independent schools, individuals or legal entities. This study is limited to the most common form of municipal organiser, that is, municipalities and their committee organisations.

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6 National Agency for Education (2000). *Grundskolan: kursplaner och betygsriterier*. 1st Ed. (2000). Stockholm p. 5.

7 National Agency for Education (2007). *Skolverkets utbildningsinspektion: en sammanfattning av resultat och erfarenheter under tre år*. Stockholm; Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2009). *Tillsyn och kvalitetsgranskning*. Stockholm: Swedish Schools Inspectorate; Greiff, Camilo von (2009). *Lika skola med olika resurser?: en ESO-rapport om likvärdighet och resursfördelning*. Stockholm: Ministry of Finance, Government Offices.

This is a qualitative study whose empirical data consists of interviews with the three highest political offices in charge of the school system, (the Chair of the Municipal Assembly, the Chair of the Municipal Executive Committee and the Chair of the Education Committee), and the two most senior administrative officers, (the Municipal Chief Executive and the Head of Department for Education) in eight municipalities.<sup>8</sup> The aim is to highlight different patterns and problem scenarios that exist. The selection of municipalities was made in order to achieve as much variation as possible, while keeping the number of interviews manageable.<sup>9</sup>

The interviews were conducted in late 2009 and early 2010. In two municipalities, in addition to an ordinary Municipal Commissioner, the municipality had a politician employed specifically to deal with school matters. Thus, 42 interviews were conducted in total. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. An interview schedule focusing on the receipt, management and perceived effects of various forms of national governance was the common starting point for all the interviews. Quotations from the interviews have been used to illustrate and highlight points made in the study.

Legal references are made to the Education Act (1985:1100) with ordinances that were in force when the study was performed in 2009 and 2010, but references are also made where necessary to the corresponding sections of the Education Act (2010:800) that came into force on 1 July 2011.

For the purpose of illustration, the study exemplifies the interpretation and action of responsible authorities in two areas; the quality of out-of-school centres and the education of compulsory school teachers. The point of departure is two criticisms made in assessments by the National Agency for Education.<sup>10</sup>

- Municipalities must ensure that group sizes and staff ratios in out-of-school centres are adapted to the needs that exist in different out-of-school centres. Municipalities should monitor and evaluate the activities of out-of-school centres, for example the relationship between group size and staff ratio and quality.<sup>11</sup>

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8 In the study, the terms “schools” and “school system” also include out-of-school centres for school-age child care. The terms “municipal leadership” and “higher political level” denote the municipal assembly and the municipal executive committee. The term “lower municipal level” denotes the committee level together with the department level.

9 The selection criteria are described in Appendix 1.

10 The decision to use assessments from a number of years ago was made, among others things, to enable the tracing of any process and effect resulting from the Agency’s criticism. These criticisms were preceded and followed by recommendations delivering the same message.

11 National Agency for Education (2007). *Skolverkets lägesbedömning 2007: förskoleverksamhet, skolbarnsomsorg, skola och vuxenutbildning*. Stockholm p. 12.

- Independent and municipal responsible authorities must ensure that schools have teachers with a Bachelor of Education qualification and that the teachers, with as few exceptions as possible, teach the subjects and years for which they were trained.<sup>12</sup>

## Outline

The chapter entitled “The governance of schools” gives an introduction to the national governance of school education and the responsibility of municipalities for quality and goal attainment in the school system.

This is followed by a description, based on the interviews conducted, of how the most senior politicians and the highest ranking administrative officers regard how the municipality perceives the assignment and handles the national governance. Each chapter ends with a summary and discussion.

The first of these chapters, “Interpretation of the responsible authority’s assignment”, focuses on the municipality’s role and assignment as the responsible authority for school education, as regulated in the Education Act.

The following chapter, “National governance through goal and performance monitoring”, focuses on describing how the national governance in the form of policy documents is perceived and handled. This chapter also describes how central government’s informational approaches for increasing the impact of the policy documents have been perceived and handled.

The last of these three chapters, “The municipality’s financial responsibility”, focuses primarily on how the municipality utilises available financial resources to create a school organisation that achieves the national goals. There is also minor discussion of national governance in the form of targeted, more or less temporary, funding.

The chapter “Conclusions” summarises the results of the study. The report closes with a brief insight into the need for further studies and continued dialogue in order to increase understanding and clarity with regard to the interface between national governance of schools and municipal self-government.

The appendices provide further information about the study. Appendix 1 contains a description of the study’s method and execution. Appendix 2 describes the positions in a municipal organisation with specialist committees.

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12 National Agency for Education (2006). *Skolverkets lägesbedömning 2006: förskoleverksamhet, skolbarnsomsorg, skola och vuxenutbildning*. Stockholm p. 22.

# The governance of schools

## Central government policy instruments

The aim of the state with regard to the school system is for “education to provide pupils with knowledge and skills and, in cooperation with their homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible individuals and members of society. Consideration is to be shown for pupils in need of particular support. [...] Education, in every form of school, is to be of an equal standard, wherever in the country it is organised.”<sup>13</sup>

The state has various forms of policy instrument at its disposal. The literature on governance sometimes divides these into three different policy instruments: legal, normative and financial.<sup>14</sup> Normative governance may also be known as ideological or informative policy instruments.<sup>15</sup>

- Legal governance means governance by means of laws, ordinances and other legally binding regulations legislated by political bodies. This may relate to specifically targeted laws (the Education Act) and ordinances (curricula and syllabuses), but also general policy documents concerning the school system, such as the Local Government Act. Legal governance is binding.
- Normative governance is exercised through influence on the focus and content of the system. In the area of schools, this takes place through clarification of the national goals to be achieved by the system. Although normative governance of schools is legally grounded, it is more focused on changing thinking than on compelling a certain way of acting. This is particularly the case when normative governance is explained and justified on the basis of follow-up, evaluation, research and proven documented experience, known as informative governance. The governance effect is that if those acting within a system embrace a common operational goal, this will influence the focus and design of that system.
- Financial governance takes place through the central government injection of financial resources into the system. These may be more or less accompanied by conditions on their use. The financial support for the school system is part of the general grant to municipalities from central government. The national financial governance of schools through conditional funding

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13 Chapter 1, Section 2 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and Chapter 1, Section 9 of the Education Act (2010:800).

14 Pierre, Jon (ed.) (2007). *Skolan som politisk organisation*. 1st Ed. Malmö: Gleerups p. 25. See also du Rietz, Lars, Lundgren, Ulf P. & Wennäs, Olof (1987). *Ansvarsfördelning och styrning på skolområdet: ett beredningsunderlag*. Stockholm: Allmänna förl. pp. 27f,

15 Pierre, Jon (ed.) (2007). *Skolan som politisk organisation*. 1st Ed. Malmö: Gleerups p. 26.

is very small, only a few per cent compared with the general central government grant.

The central government policy instruments – and above all the legal and normative ones – are used in the study to provide starting points for the interpretation of the empirical data collected. Law is a basis for all national governance. This study uses the legal perspective as a means of focusing on responsibility for schools on the basis of the Education Act. Normative and informative governance are used to show how the national policy documents are perceived and handled by the responsible authorities.

As the financial governance by central government is very limited, the study focuses on the municipality's view of the responsibility to determine the size and allocation of resources for the school system in order to achieve the national goals. For this reason, the way in which financial management is implemented locally is an important element of how responsible authorities take responsibility for providing pupils with equal opportunities to attain the goals.

Within each of these perspectives, the interviews illustrate how the municipalities studied perceive and manage the governance signals from the state, and the consequences that can be discerned.

## The municipalisation of schools

The principal responsibility for schools that was previously shared between central government and municipalities was changed in the early 1990s. In 1991, municipalities were given full principal responsibility for schools.<sup>16</sup> This included employer responsibility for head teachers and teachers. In addition, the central government regulation of how the allocated financial resources were to be used ceased. The nationally regulated central government grant for schools was replaced by a sector grant, which after a few years was subsumed into the general grant to municipalities from central government.<sup>17</sup>

The Government Official Report on changes to the division of responsibility notes that the municipal assembly, as the highest decision-making body of a municipality, will have a more important role than previously through its responsibility for long-term school planning and the allocation of municipal resources.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Govt. Bill (1989/90:41). *Om kommunalt huvudmannaskap för lärare, skolledare, biträdande skolledare och syofunktionärer*. Stockholm.

17 For a more detailed description, see Dahlberg, Matz & Rattsø, Jørn (2010). *Statliga bidrag till kommunerna: i princip och praktik*. Stockholm: Ministry of Finance, pp. 37ff.

18 SOU 1988:20. *En förändrad ansvarsfördelning och styrning på skolområdet: betänkande från Beredningen om ansvarsfördelning och styrning på skolområdet*. Stockholm: Allmänna förl. p. 25.

Through municipalisation of schools in the early 1990s, central government altered the force of its policy instruments. From the three perspectives on governance in this study – legal, normative and financial – there were clear changes.

Legal governance was changed through a reduction in the degree of detail in laws and ordinances. This is commonly referred to as a reduction in regulatory governance. The Education Act prescribes that the responsible authority is to ensure that schools operate in accordance with laws and ordinances. It is therefore the responsible authority's interpretation and actions in practice that demonstrate the effect of legal governance.

The central government's strategy led to an increase in the emphasis on normative governance, which now became the most prominent policy instrument.<sup>19</sup> An informative marker of this change was the Curriculum Committee's report *Skola för bildning* (School for Learning)<sup>20</sup>, which describes and explains the normative basis. This is subsequently illustrated in the form of, for example, new and redesigned curricula and syllabuses. The curriculum describes the responsibilities of the responsible authority, the head teacher and the teachers. The aim is for the national goals, through acceptance by the staff, to have a governing effect on the activities. Continuous self-monitoring of performance will show staff and the responsible authority whether further efforts are needed to achieve the goals. As part of the informative component of normative governance, a large quantity of material is developed to support the implementation of the new policy documents.

Financial governance, which had previously been strong in the form of regulated central government grants, weakened significantly in the wake of municipalisation. It was now the responsibility of every responsible authority to allocate to the schools the resources deemed necessary to achieve the goals set in laws and ordinances.

Through a clearer division of responsibility and a shared understanding of the purpose and goals of the school system, the state wanted to find a better way to improve goal attainment through greater participation from those responsible in municipalities and schools. By means of the possibilities provided by municipal self-government to reorganise and supplement resources in the light of local needs, equitability and quality could be reinforced. The change is based on the principle of subsidiarity: that decisions should be made

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19 Du Rietz, Lars, Lundgren, Ulf P. & Wennås, Olof (1987). *Ansvarsfördelning och styrning på skolområdet: ett beredningsunderlag*. Stockholm: Allmänna förl. p. 28.

20 SOU 1992:94. The Curriculum Committee. *Skola för bildning: huvudbetänkande*. Stockholm: Allmänna förl.

at the lowest appropriate level, but that the higher level is obliged to support lower levels where necessary.

The division of responsibility for the school system can be illustrated as in Figure 1:

**Figure 1.** Division of responsibility



The task of the responsible authority is to create the conditions required for the schools to achieve the goals. This task in turn means that the responsible authority, in order to provide the right conditions, must be aware of the state's objectives and requirements as expressed in the Education Act and ordinances.

A distinctive feature of the current system of national governance is what is known as dual governance. One of the forms of governance means, for instance, that central government assigns the municipality in its role as responsible authority the task of providing schools with the conditions to enable the national goals to be achieved. The second form of governance bypasses the responsible authority and gives teachers and head teachers the task of creating a school locally where pupils are given the conditions to attain the goals defined in curricula and syllabuses.

## Interpretation of the responsible authority's assignment

This chapter begins with the Education Act's description of where in a municipality the responsibility for schools lies. It then describes how this responsibility is perceived by the interviewed politicians and officials, and how it is managed. Then follows a discussion of how the interviewed municipal representatives' interpretation of their role as responsible authority might affect goal attainment and of whether the approach of the state may have influenced the municipal interpretation.

### The municipal assembly is the responsible authority for schools

The operations of a municipality are very extensive. These consist essentially of two components. One component is imposed by central government and involves responsibility for important societal functions such as schools, social care, planning and construction, environment and public health, street cleaning and waste management, water and sewers, civil defence, housing, public transport and libraries. There are also municipal operations that are not governed by central government, such as leisure and cultural activities, business contacts, marketing, technical service, energy supply and street maintenance.

A municipality's operations with respect to schools directly or indirectly affect the majority of its residents. A municipality's responsibility for the schools encompasses pre-schools, school-age child care, schools and adult education. Together with care of the elderly and persons with disabilities, it constitutes the vast majority of the municipal budget.

The Education Act states that the municipality is the responsible authority for schools.<sup>21</sup> The municipal assembly, as the municipality's highest decision-making body, determines objectives and guidelines for municipal operations and allocates financial resources to them.<sup>22</sup> This cannot be delegated.<sup>23</sup> The municipal assembly is to appoint a municipal executive committee and any additional committees required to discharge the tasks of the municipality

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21 Chapter 1, Section 4 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and Chapter 2, Section 2 of the Education Act (2010:800).

22 Chapter 3, Section 9 of the Local Government Act (1991:900). See also SOU 1998:20 *En förändrad ansvarsfördelning och styrning på skolområdet* p. 25, which gives prominence to the role of the municipal assembly to provide resources in order to realise the ambitions of central government and municipalities.

23 Chapter 3, Section 10 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

according to specific statutes.<sup>24</sup> The Education Act states that every municipality is to appoint one or more committees to govern its public education system.<sup>25</sup> The assignment from central government to the responsible authorities entails responsibility for education to be conducted in accordance with the national policy documents, that is, to allocate resources and organise schools to enable national goals and guidelines set out in the Education Act and ordinances to be fulfilled.<sup>26</sup> This means that it is the municipal assembly that has the responsible authority's power and obligations – the power to give the system the conditions required and the ultimate responsibility for the attainment of national goals in municipal schools.

The statutory provisions to be met by responsible authorities, which receive special attention in this study, are both goal attainment with respect to basic knowledge:

- All pupils are to at least achieve the knowledge requirements for goals to be attained in years 5 and 9. (Chapter 2, Section 8 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and SKOLFS 2000:135)

and guidelines relating to out-of-school centres and teacher qualifications:

- Out-of-school centres are to have staff with such training or experience that they are able to satisfy children's needs for care and good pedagogy. Children's groups are to be of a suitable composition and size and the premises are to be appropriate (Chapter 2a, Section 3 of the Education Act (1985:1100));
- teachers are to have the appropriate education for the teaching they will primarily conduct. (Chapter 2, Section 3 of the Education Act (1985:1100)).<sup>27</sup>

The municipal assembly is *responsible* for the schools' achievement of the national goals and requirements levels, but is, according to the Education Act and the Local Government Act, to appoint a committee to *discharge* the state's

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24 Chapter 3, Section 3 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

25 Chapter 2, Section 1 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and Chapter 2, Section 2 of the Education Act (2010:800).

26 Chapter 2, Section 8 of the Education Act (1985:1100), Chapter 2, Section 8 of the Education Act (2010:800), National Agency for Education (2011). *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2011*, p.11. Cf. the 'Responsibility Bill' SOU 1990/91:18 p. 25, and SOU 2007:79 *Statlig styrning, organisation och ansvarsfördelning* p. 78.

27 Exceptions may be made only if persons with such training are not available or there is some other special reason in view of the pupils.

assignments for the school system.<sup>28</sup> In this way, such a committee is accountable for schools to the municipal assembly, which as responsible authority is in turn accountable to central government. Supervision of how the committees manage their operations is exercised by the municipal assembly's drafting body, the municipal executive committee.<sup>29</sup> The committee converts political governance into operational management by placing the operational role at administrative level, from which a Head of Department is accountable to the education committee. At the local level, it is the head teacher who, with state agency responsibility regulated by the Education Act, directs and allocates the work on the basis of the regulations contained in the education legislation.

## Varying perceptions of the responsibility authority in practice

It is well known among the interviewed politicians and officials that, under the Education Act, the municipality is the responsible authority for schools. However, there are different perceptions among the various interviewees about where in a municipality the responsibility lies.<sup>30</sup> Even within the municipalities in this study, there are differing perceptions of which municipal body has the role of responsible authority.<sup>31</sup> Some of the municipalities place the responsibility with a political body, while others identify the department level as responsible. There are also differences in whether the principal organiser is identified as a function or a person.

<i>Principal organiser is ...</i>	<i>Example of reasoning</i>
Municipal Assembly	The municipal assembly delegates to the committee. There is a schools plan decided on by the municipal assembly. This indicates that the school issue is an assembly issue.
Municipal Executive Committee	The municipal executive committee is the employer for the whole municipality.
Education Committee	The committee is the body that has the municipal assembly's assignment and responds to all reports.
Head of Department	The Head of Department is the representative of the municipality.

28 Chapter 1, Section 1 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and Chapter 2, Section 2 of the Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 3, Section 3 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

29 Chapter 6, Section 1 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

30 The municipal organisation is described in Appendix 3.

31 The fact that there are differences within the municipality in who acts as responsible authority is also clear from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's publication *Utvärdering av regionala utvecklingscentrum och nationella resurscentrum* p. 7 (2009).

The interviewees thus perceive the responsibility to be able to lie at all the different levels in a municipality other than that of the Municipal Chief Executive. There are also views which consider the responsible authority role to be represented at multiple levels. *“The responsible authority is the Chair of the Education Committee and the Head of the Education Department,”* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). One argument is that the responsibility depends on nature of the issue, with practical matters being further down and matters of principle higher up. *“Looking at it from a political perspective, it is the Committee Chair, but looking at it operationally, it is our Head of Education. We divide it between us depending on what the issue is,”* (Committee Chair). Another way to view this is to place the responsibility at the level at which the matter may be assumed to be managed. *“The responsible authority is above all the Head of Department, but in combination with the Committee Chair or the Chair of the Executive Committee, depending on the weight of the issue,”* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). This is evident, for example, when some of the interviewees first place responsibility for group sizes at out-of-school centres and pupil-teacher ratios at the committee level, but when they realise that changes in these cases require financial investment, their perception shifts and they place the responsibility with the municipal assembly. *“Increasing the pupil-teacher ratio is a committee issue. But becomes a budget issue dealt with in the municipal executive committee, so in principle it is an assembly issue,”* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly).

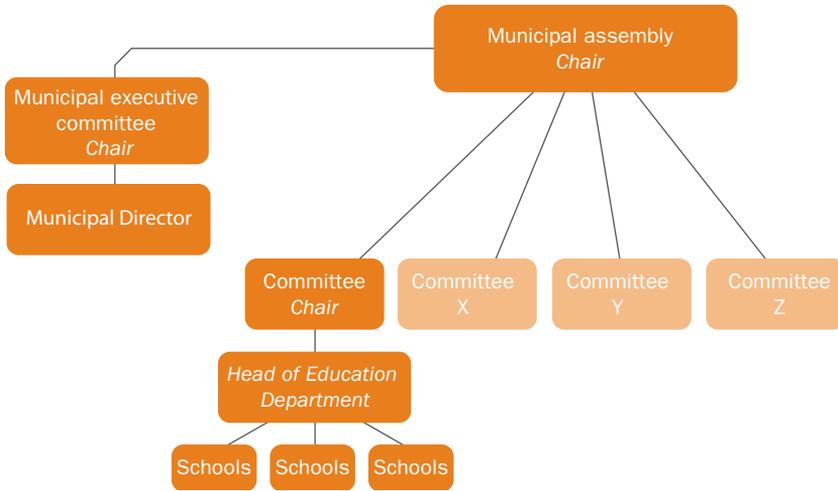
## **The interviewees’ view of their role and assignment**

Important background knowledge for understanding how the municipality perceives and manages the role of responsible authorities is the view the interviewees have of their role in their own municipal organisation. Of those interviewed in each municipality, three are elected representatives and two are senior administrative officers. Figure 2 shows the positions of the interviewees (in italics) in the municipal organisation.<sup>32</sup>

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32 The figure also shows the level of head teacher to indicate the position of head teachers (in their exercise of central government authority) in the municipal organisation. The figure does not include elected auditors. These are the assembly’s instruments for examining whether municipal bodies live up to the assembly’s operational and budgetary goals. Head teachers and municipal auditors are not included in this study.

**Figure 2**



Below is a summary view of how the interviewees in each post describe their role and their responsibility. Their descriptions are in some respects placed in relation to the views of current research on municipalities.

## The elected representatives

### Chair of the Municipal Assembly

The eight Chairs of the Municipal Assembly interviewed do not have the same view of their own role. The views range from seeing themselves in their role as an active guarantor of civic democratic governance to describing themselves as a passive chair of meetings.

Some Chairs of the Municipal Assembly express an ambition to emphasise the municipal assembly as the highest decision-making body in the municipality. They underline that it is the municipal assembly that decides, delegates and, through municipal auditors and the municipal executive committee, oversees that everything is properly managed. These Chairs are the highest ranking elected municipal representatives and are therefore the ones who are to guarantee democratic transparency and to assert the rule of law. *“I am responsible for the decisions made in the municipal assembly. If, for example, we have made a decision on plans against bullying, I have to ‘oversee’ that the committee implements them,”* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). In some cases, these Chairs take their own initiatives and are present in the municipal executive committee to select the matters to be raised in the municipal assembly. *“We determine the headings,”* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). Even if this does not

alter the municipal executive committee's proposals, it does indicate a desire to highlight the significance of the municipal assembly.

Other Chairs of the Municipal Assembly give a more subtle and passive view of their role in the highest political leadership. *"More a case of sitting up there and giving the floor,"* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). The municipal assembly is seen as a decision-making apparatus that simply approves the decisions that in practice have been made in the municipal executive committee. The municipal assembly's task is to open matters for discussion and then confirm the decisions proposed by the municipal executive committee.

Common to all the interviewed Chairs is the description that proposals from the municipal executive committee are almost never amended in the municipal assembly. This is true generally, regardless of committee. It appears, however, that it is possible to describe the extent of the municipal assembly's power in terms of the number of matters that are referred back to the committee, for example when the background and decision documents have been found by the assembly to be inadequate. The number of issues initiated by the municipal assembly may also be an indication of its status and power.

In practice, a systematic discussion of schools system and goal attainment appears to be rare in the municipal assembly. The school system is considered to be complicated and to require specialist expertise. It is believed that lower levels, where expertise is greater, are better placed to handle the issue. For this reason, school-related matters are characterised either by being formal approvals of annual reports or by specific matters, such as school closures or the establishment of independent schools. The latter gain more weight through media coverage and polarised positions among politicians and lobbyists. *"At the moment, there is one politically charged issue, independent schools, that has overshadowed the rest. Otherwise, there is no discussion on schools specifically,"* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly).

The municipal assembly has been characterised as a mere rubber-stamp for decisions that in practice have already been made in the municipal executive committee<sup>33</sup>, which is something that is confirmed by the interviews. *"The municipal assembly has the ultimate responsibility, but in practice the power lies elsewhere,"* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). Statements such as *"The responsible authority is not us, it is the committee,"* (Chair of the Municipal Assembly) show that not only the operational responsibility, which can of course be delegated downwards in the organisation, but also the ultimate responsibility for schools can be perceived as lying at the education committee level.

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33 Montin, Stig (2007). *Moderna kommuner*. 3rd Ed. Malmö: Liber pp. 73, 97f.

As previously mentioned, some Chairs expressed dissatisfaction with this passive role. The justification for this consists of democratic arguments, for example that the school system directly or indirectly affects the majority of the municipality's residents and its budget makes up nearly half of the municipal budget.<sup>34</sup> Some of the interviewed Chairs of the Municipal Assembly argue that the municipal assembly should play a greater role in providing broader and better support for decisions. *"We are tired of sitting and nodding our heads in the assembly"* is a double-edged statement that expresses this frustration.

### **Chair of the Executive Committee**

Through their descriptions, the Chairs of the Executive Committee, or Municipal Commissioners, express that they have a strong position based on their having an overall view of what happens in the municipality. Those with a background in the school system say that they have a special personal interest in this sector. Other Municipal Commissioners, however, view the school sector as just one among others in the municipality. What is common to their descriptions is that they have less to do with the school sector than with other sectors in the municipality. Their primary attention is focused on sectors such as enterprise, infrastructure, demographics and marketing. *"It is the committee that has full responsibility for schools; they know schools. We take responsibility for so much else,"* (Chair of the Executive Committee). According to the interviews, schools receive attention as a problem area, but not as something to occasion action from the municipal executive committee. Responsibility for the system's goal attainment is separated from the power to allocate resources. *"The municipal executive committee should keep its hands off schools as long as the committee keeps within the budget,"* (Chair of the Executive Committee).

The Chairs of the Executive Committee express their primary task as one of assessing and prioritising the various municipal operations' needs in relation to the overall municipal benefit. *"My role is to balance the whole. I have a coordinating role,"* (Chair of the Executive Committee). The concept of "municipal benefit" refers to what is regarded as promoting the well-being of municipal residents. It is a collective term for issues such as business and enterprise, infrastructure, demographics, marketing as well as education and social care. They regard financial governance as their most important task, that is, drafting the budget to prioritise measures based on their significance to the overall municipal benefit.

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34 Here, it may be added that in some municipalities, the municipal assembly has strengthened its real power by abolishing the committees in order to enable more direct influence on municipal operations. This 'alternative organisation' is found in around thirty municipalities. See Montin, (2007) p. 98.

The Municipal Commissioners appear to be supported by the position that they have within their own party groups in the municipality. This can be illustrated by Chairs of the Executive Committee citing their own party's opinion as more of a guide for decisions than documentation and deliberations in the municipal executive committee.

### **Chair of the Education Committee**

Descriptions by Committee Chairs show that they have a position between municipality-wide politics and the schools. This entails an intermediate position, which involves action both downwards and upwards in the municipal hierarchy. The committee's task is both to enforce decisions made by the municipal executive committee or the municipal assembly and, based on the sector's perspectives, to produce documentation for drafting in the municipal executive committee and for decisions in the municipal assembly.

This dual task is managed in different ways by the interviewed Committee Chairs. The interviews indicate that there may be a passive or an active approach in relation to the department and schools. The passive approach entails placing the responsibility for managing, e.g. cost-cutting requirements, with Head of the Education Department, who may themselves determine which areas are to be affected. The active approach is for the committee, based on its own considerations, to make decisions on the cost-cutting measures to be implemented.

Passive and active approaches can also be discerned in the relationship upwards to the municipal executive committee. The passive approach is expressed in the interviews as a resigned acceptance of the situation of being one committee among other committees. Here, they consider the "municipal benefit" without asserting just their own area. This situation can be illustrated by a statement from one Chair of the Executive Committee: "*The Childcare and Education Committee is loyal to the municipal leadership. We have understood each other fairly well,*" (Chair of the Executive Committee). Another view expressed is that the committee asserts the importance of its needs, for example by referring to national policy documents, evaluation results or parental opinion. This in turn means that it challenges other committees in the competition for common municipal resources. One way to then further increase its impact is for the committee to put party political differences aside and act as a unified "committee party" against the other committees. However, this is an approach that some of the interviewed Municipal Commissioners describe as disloyal to the "municipal benefit". "*The Childcare and Education Committee is an active and dedicated committee. But there are always problems with committee parties. We see that here to some extent,*" (Chair of the Executive Committee).

There are Committee Chairs who express pride in and commitment to their role and assignment. They also have a desire to be visible in schools. This can have several purposes. One is to see things for themselves and compare with the perceptions conveyed to them in the form of statistics or phone calls from parents. In doing so, they will be able to express a knowledge of situations that have arisen due to downgrading priorities. *“I am usually out there and listening, and I know that the out-of-school centres have a tough situation,”* (Committee Chair). Another purpose described is to bear the main brunt of an uncomfortable decision and thus try to stem the tide.

## The administrative officers

### **Municipal Chief Executive**

The Municipal Chief Executives express their position as being at some distance from the school system. They say that they are ill informed about the regulations and goals of schools. The Municipal Chief Executives describe their knowledge of the situation in the municipal school system as focused on how it appears in the municipal follow-up systems. *“As Municipal Chief Executive, I don’t look at the curriculum, but at key figures,”* (Municipal Chief Executive). Municipal Chief Executives who have previously worked in the school sector have a broader knowledge and a greater interest in the school situation.

Most see themselves as coordinators of all municipal areas, of which schools is just one. *“Every two weeks, I meet with Heads of Department and others. Everyone cooperates. The whole supports the parts. It’s important to keep within the budget. Important to work across sectors,”* (Municipal Chief Executive). According to our interviews, their focus is often dominated by organisational, business and financial problem-solving and development efforts. For Municipal Chief Executives, the school sector is primarily part of an organisational or financial context.

The Municipal Chief Executives express themselves in terms of actions. They describe what has been done and what should be done, often focusing on specific problematic situations. Common tasks for them are streamlining the organisation and enhancing the municipality’s marketing, i.e. creating conditions for sound municipal finances. There are also instances of Municipal Chief Executives being frustrated that the school sector does not behave as rationally as they expect.

Through their role in preparing issues for the municipal executive committee, Municipal Chief Executives have a screening function. Proximity to political power, comprehensive knowledge of operations and finances, and participation in meetings of the municipal executive committee provide the Municipal Chief Executives with opportunities for great influence by present-

ing views of the situation and needs of the municipality.<sup>35</sup> *“Every Thursday, I take part in municipal executive committee drafting and meetings.” (Municipal Chief Executive).*

### **Head of the Department for Education**

Heads of the Department for Education have different titles – Head of Education, Head of Childcare and Education – depending on the scope of their responsibility. The Head of Department’s situation varies depending on the size of the municipality, from managing a whole department to being alone.

The interviews indicate that the Head of Department has two types of intermediate position. One is an intermediate position between municipal politics and the school system. Here, the Head of Department can choose to emphasise the needs of the schools system over political considerations or to prioritise a political stance over the needs of the school system. The interviewed Heads of Department say that it is the political will, often communicated through financial requirements, that is the ultimate guiding principle. The other intermediate position is between the municipal assignment and the state directives for schools. A Head of Department works on behalf of the municipality. Although no central government assignment is addressed to Heads of Department, they have to relate their professional role and actions to laws and ordinances that address the municipality as responsible authority as well as heads and teachers.

The position between the municipal assignment, the school system and state requirements on municipalities also allows scope for the Head of Department’s own priorities and strategies. In line with this, some Heads of Department say in the interviews that they strive to strengthen their own capacity to set the priorities they regard as best for the school system. Two main strategies may be discerned. One strategy is to influence decisions in advance through explicit formulations. *“As Head of Department, I am the person closest to the political level responsible to ensure that they receive documentation upon which they can make wise decisions,” (Head of Department).* The other strategy is to influence afterwards by having the freedom to interpret general political decisions expressed in visions and ambitions. This is noted critically by one Municipal Chief Executive. *“Politicians do not give clear assignments, and this makes the department too independent,” (Municipal Chief Executive).*

In describing the boundary to the political level, a distinction is made between “what” and “how”. “What” indicates that it is an issue for politicians

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35 Cf. Högberg, Örjan (2007). *Maktlösa makthavare: en studie om kommunalt chefskap*. Diss. Linköping: Linköping University, 2007 pp. 201 ff.

and “how” that it is a matter for the administration. “*We have been in agreement on the division of responsibility – the difference between the what, i.e. the visions and ambitions, and the how. A political what, and then we describe how,*” (Head of Department). In practice, the seemingly clear distinction between “what” and “how” is not very helpful. A Head of Department may in various ways direct the focus of the politicians’ “what”<sup>36</sup>, while the politicians are often also interested in the “how”. “*By also presenting the how part to politicians, they can change focus. Anything can be made a what issue: Policy determines what, focus and budget,*” (Head of Department).

The boundaries between the responsibilities of the committee and of the Head of Department are fluid and vary from municipality to municipality. The interviews show that the Head of Department may be the initiating and initiated party. However, the political side has the ultimate power in that it appoints and can dismiss Heads of Department. It is very often personal relationships and the people’s skill in carrying out their assignment that determine the division of power and the focus of operations. “*The Childcare and Education Committee is dependent on how skilled the Head of Department is. Therefore, the Head of Department has a lot of power to support or ruin things,*” (Municipal Chief Executive). This leads to a kind of interdependence. The interviewed Committee Chairs describe their dependence on the Head of Department’s knowledge in issues brought to the municipal executive committee. Similarly, Heads of Department describe the importance of Committee Chairs supporting the communication of political decisions to schools.

The Heads of Department express an ambition to focus the pedagogical aspect within schools. They note, however, that in practice this gives way to a reality mainly consisting of many fixed meeting times, administrative and financial tasks, personnel problems and reorganisations. However, the Heads of Department try to manage their tasks so that an indirect effect is to protect, and at best enhance, the pedagogical quality in schools. According to the interviewed Heads of Department, the part of their work that has a greater development impact on schools consists of management and organisational issues. These have less direct focus on the causes of inadequate goal attainment.

The Head of Department is the only post that is not named in education legislation, but which central government presupposes exists, in official texts. Although the interviewed Heads of Department express their ambition to comply with the national guidelines and goal documents, the responsibility may pass by the Head of Department without breaching any ordinance.<sup>37</sup>

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36 Montin, Stig (2007) pp. 107ff.

37 Nihlfors, Elisabet (2003). *Skolchefen i skolans styrning och ledning*. Diss. Uppsala University 2003 p. 219.

The Head of Department is the superior of the head teachers and teachers in a municipality. While Heads of Department are employed by and receive their assignments from the political leadership of the municipality, head teachers and teachers exercise central government authority and have tasks directly formulated by the state. The Heads of Department say this is a reason why, despite their formal power, they have difficulties in leading and achieving impact for their intentions with head teachers in practice.

## **A downward shift of authority responsibility**

Overall, the interviews with politicians and officials provide a picture of the authority responsibility being shifted downwards in the organisation. It is clear from the interviews that while power over the conditions within the school system remains at the higher level, the role of responsible authority is often delegated to a committee or department. Factors contributing to this are that the school sector is considered complicated and that the assignment from the state is perceived as being primarily addressed to head teachers and teachers.

The following describes the way the interviews present the downward decentralisation within the municipal organisation. There then follows a description of the feedback of the current situation within schools to higher levels of responsibility.

### **From the municipal assembly to the municipal executive committee**

The municipal assembly is responsible for municipal operations being conducted in accordance with national laws and ordinances. The assembly has the ultimate decision-making power in the municipality.

In order to manage the situation of a large number of elected representatives in the municipal assembly and an extensive area of responsibility, there is a municipal executive committee, whose statutory duty is to draft matters within all operational areas for decision in the municipal assembly.<sup>38</sup> The municipal executive committee is thus to provide a basis for the municipal assembly's deliberations and decisions. There are instances, however, of the municipal executive committee functioning as a "mini-assembly" by also making decisions on issues that are part of the municipal assembly's responsibility. The decisions are considered to be the same, but how they are taken is perceived to be more efficient.

Decisions concerning the municipality's operational priorities are also in practice made in the municipal executive committee, as it is here the allocation

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38 Chapter 6, Section 4 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

of finances to operational areas takes shape. *“The assembly deals with overall goals. The municipal executive committee makes most budget decisions. The committee looks after the details,”* (Chair of the Executive Committee).

There is research which shows that it is the municipal executive committee which in practice determines the conditions within the municipal school system. The municipal assembly is described as a “means to an end”.<sup>39</sup> It is the municipal executive committee that is the municipality’s seat of informal power. “The real political power rests with individual Municipal Commissioners and senior officials.”<sup>40</sup>

### From the municipal executive committee to the committees

The primary focus of the municipal executive committee is described as being on its self-initiated processes and projects, often with a business or infrastructure perspective. In cases where matters concern schools, they tend to relate to areas outside the school sector’s core activities. Examples of such matters are the placement of schools, the establishment of independent schools, school transport and the streamlining of the school meals organisation. *“The municipal executive committee is in charge of financial changes of greater importance, such as new construction and the relocation of schools,”* (Chair of the Executive Committee).

According to the interviews, the focus of the municipal executive committee is on the allocation of finances to the different municipal operations. However, neither the municipal executive committee nor the municipal assembly is viewed as the body that is ultimately responsible for goal attainment in the school system. One reason cited is that when central government sets the goals, central government is ultimately responsible for their attainment. *“Central government sets goals for the municipality. Is not then central government the responsible authority?”* (Municipal Chief Executive.) It is true that the inadequate goal attainment of schools receives attention in the municipal executive committee and is seen as a concern, especially when goal attainment is lower than the national average for the Sweden’s municipalities. But the responsibility for inadequate goal attainment, and for addressing it, is placed at the committee level.

All the municipalities describe the committee as being heavily dependent on the municipal executive committee’s actions and also in practice accountable to it. The Local Government Act does not give the municipal executive committee any authority over other committees, but there are strong indications

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39 Montin, Stig (2007) p. 73.

40 Montin, Stig (2007) pp. 97f.

that the municipal executive committee in practice functions as a superior body.<sup>41</sup> The increased concentration of power to the Chair of the Executive Committee, the Municipal Commissioner, may lead to specialist committees being ignored.<sup>42</sup> The interview statements suggest that an unregulated relationship of committee accountability to the municipal executive committee has been created that is not found in the formal regulation of municipal organisation under the Local Government Act, which states that the committee is accountable to the municipal assembly.<sup>43</sup>

### From the Committee to the Head of Department

The education committee is to discharge the municipal assembly's role of responsible authority to implement a school system in which all pupils are given the conditions to attain the national goals for education. If the committee finds the school system too complex, it is possible that the political task of balancing needs and resources is in practice assumed by the Head of Department or individual municipal administrators. These administrators thus acquire increased power at the expense of politicians.<sup>44</sup> This situation is illustrated by the fact that school politicians only act once the administration has drafted a proposal for consideration and political decision. Thus, essentially, the education committee's actions become more reactive than proactive.<sup>45</sup>

In this situation, the Head of Department has great influence over the matters to be raised on the political agenda. This may take place as a matter of routine or, as in this case, in an active way: *"I am responsible for introducing the professional assignments that central government has placed on municipalities into the political process. As a professional, I have to present the risk and impact assessments and what the law says to the committee. 'If you are going to break the law, then you should know that you are doing so',"* (Head of Department). At the same time, Heads of Department express difficulties in presenting proposals to committee members that the politicians do not always have sufficient knowledge to understand. *"We have worked hard to clarify the situation to the politicians. We have worked hard to show on paper the things that the politicians do not understand,"* (Head of Department).

Although the interviews demonstrate a dividing line whereby politicians are responsible for what should be done and officials for executing it, the roles are described as confused in practice. The roles can even be reversed. This means

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41 Petersson, Olof (2006). *Kommunalpolitik*. 5th Ed. Stockholm: Norstedts juridik p. 150.

42 Petersson, Olof (2006) p. 135.

43 Chapter 3, Section 3 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

44 Montin, Stig (2007) p. 109.

45 National Agency for Education (1999a) p. 35.

that it can be the Head of Department who draws up the long-term plans for the school sector, while it is the politicians who manage matters of detail.<sup>46</sup>

There are many indications that a relationship exists between Heads of Department and politicians at the municipal level in which the politicians are at a clear disadvantage.<sup>47</sup> The influence of Heads of Department on the political agenda is illustrated by the view that they sometimes consider themselves to bear the authority responsibility, as evidenced by this response to the question of who is the responsible authority for schools: *“In practice, it is me. But actually it is the assembly,”* (Head of Department). Many strategic issues concerning the focus of the school system may therefore come to be managed without the involvement of politicians.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, the shift of political responsibility downwards in the organisation may entail a deadlock in the Head of Department’s possibilities to act. This confirms research findings that show that even professional groups may feel powerless because, in practice, the “power” includes prioritising needs on the basis of allocated resources.<sup>49</sup> The freedom to act is restricted and complicated by the fact that power over the allocation of financial resources remains with the political leadership of the municipality. The interviews suggest that one way to handle this situation may be to channel the responsibility for goal attainment further down to each head teacher. *“Responsibility for poor goal attainment rests with the committee. But in practice it rests with head teachers and teachers,”* (Head of Department). The situation of head teachers, trapped between municipal and national requirements, has received attention in other contexts.<sup>50</sup>

## Feedback difficulties

The overall picture from the interviews reveals a separation of powers and responsibility in the political organisation of the municipality. This need not be a problem if there is a functioning system for feedback from those who have been assigned the operational responsibility to those who have the powers to provide the conditions. However, it is necessary for those with the powers to have the capability to use and act on the information they receive.

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46 Pettersson, Olof (2006) p. 140.

47 Blom, Agneta P. (1994). *Kommunalt chefskap: en studie om ansvar, ledarskap och demokrati*. Diss. Lund University p. 167.

48 Blom, Agneta P. (1994) p. 175.

49 Montin, Stig (2007) p. 109

50 E.g. Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010). *Rektors ledarskap: en granskning av hur rektor leder skolans arbete mot ökad måluppfyllelse*. Stockholm.; Swedish Work Environment Authority (2011) *Rektorers arbetsmiljö*. ISG 2011/100102.

There is a consensus between Heads of Department and Committee Chairs on the difficulty for them to find support for their views and needs at the highest political level, where the power to change the organisation and allocate resources exists. *“Everyone thinks they know something about schools,” (Committee Chair)*. All those in a decision-making position have more or less direct experience, and thus an understanding, of schools. The interviewees describe their perceptions about the school system as coming from such sources as their own children’s or grandchildren’s schooling. This means that senior politicians can express opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of schools regardless of the information and documentation they receive from the education committee. Because “everyone knows something about schools”, the “expert status” of the committee is reduced and thus the weight of its arguments. *“The status of the education committee is lower than that of other committees. Due to tradition,” (Committee Chair)*.

The interviews indicate a municipal leadership that is fully occupied with managing a lot of municipal matters, acute and long-term, of which the school sector is one part. This is quite natural. Although the school sector is large in terms of operations and budget, a tradition is described in which the school sector does not have sufficient status for it to receive the attention of the municipal leadership. The interviews demonstrate a problem in feedback from the committee, which has operational responsibility, to the municipal leadership, which has the ultimate authority responsibility. While the municipal leadership refers to the feedback it receives in the form of national statistics on the schools in the municipality, Committee Chairs and Heads of Department refer to their own data in order to provide a picture of the situation in the schools. They say that they find it difficult to find anyone at the higher municipal level willing to receive the information when they attempt to use quality reports and other documentation to provide a broader and more detailed picture based on the goals found in national policy. *“You may find that you have weak politicians in a specialist committee and then schools are in trouble. Because the municipal executive committee has no reason to understand the school sector, and does not even want to,” (Head of Department)*.

One explanation for the difficulties in giving feedback may be that the representatives of the political leadership describe themselves as primarily accountable to the residents of the municipality. They are elected by the citizens of the municipality and are evaluated every four years in municipal elections. An example of how the views of residents outweigh national statutes and National Agency for Education general guidelines can be illustrated by this quotation from a politician, *“Stockholm’ tells us to reduce group sizes, but parents want to have longer opening hours. We do what the parents want.”*

Difficulties in providing feedback to the municipal leadership on issues related to school quality and goal attainment also affect the accountability relationship in the municipality in practice. The municipal leadership assumes that the committee and the Head of Department take upon themselves this accountability to the state. The municipal leadership demands accountability for the municipal objectives for schools from the education committee. The committee level thus bears a dual accountability: one that it feels it has in relation to the state and one that it actually has in relation to the municipal leadership.

## Summary and discussion

### No clarification of how to manage the responsibility of principal organiser

The interviews demonstrate that both politicians and officials have differing perceptions of which municipal body is the addressee of the state's assignment as responsible authority for schools, that is, the level which should assume ultimate responsibility for the demands of the state. It appears to be unclear who in the municipality is the recipient of the responsible authority role and how this is to be managed.

There is also a lack of clarity as to what the role entails. One explanation for this may be sought in historical roots. At the time of municipalisation, the municipalities were unprepared for what was meant by being the responsible authorities for schools, and were initially given no support in their interpretation.<sup>51</sup> To indicate its repudiation of the previous governance system, the National Agency for Education assumed a low profile in the early 1990s and was careful not to be perceived as governing the school system. "Do not step over the municipal boundary" became a standard expression to emphasise the municipalities' own responsibility for the sector. In accordance with the notion of decentralisation and a rigorous performance management policy as intended by the Riksdag's decision with reference to the 'Responsibility Bill',<sup>52</sup> the municipalities were left to interpret and execute their responsibility to provide conditions for a school system to achieve the national goals. The reserved attitude of the state may have prevented the municipalities from communicating the issues that arose. This in turn may have concealed the need for the state level to clarify the legal requirements on responsible authorities.

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51 Stenlås, Niklas (2009). *En kär i kläm: läraryrket mellan professionella ideal och statliga reformideologier*. Stockholm: Ministry of Finance, Government Offices p. 11.

52 SOU 1990/91:18.

As early as 1993, the National Agency for Education drew attention to this problem by pointing out in its situation assessment to the Government that the municipalities, despite clear central government assignments, had only demonstrated its exercise of authority responsibility for schools to a limited extent.<sup>53</sup> Gradually, as it became clearer that municipalities were not assuming the authority responsibility as intended, the Agency produced an action plan to make the municipalities aware of their responsibility for schools. Among other things, the plan saw senior politicians in all municipalities being invited to deliberations with the Agency's management in 1997 and 1998.<sup>54</sup> The plan also included a publication entitled *Ansvar för skolan – en kommunal utmaning*, (“Responsibility for schools – a municipal challenge”), that was primarily aimed at municipal politicians. This describes the background to and the reasons for the division of responsibility between the state and the municipalities and reviews how the municipal governance mechanisms can be used to achieve the national goals. Since then, the Agency has in various contexts emphasised the importance of the responsible authorities' governance and self-monitoring of the school system.

### Lack of clarity on how to provide feedback

As the responsible authority for schools, the municipal leadership has ultimate responsibility for both the quality of the process and goal attainment. This means providing the conditions to enable the school system to follow the curriculum guidelines' quality standards, to achieve the national goals and to evaluate that this is being done. According to the interviews, this responsibility is instead shifted downwards in the organisation. In practice, this may mean that the municipal leadership's role of responsible authority to create conditions for goal attainment is placed with individual head teachers.<sup>55</sup> The fact that central government enforcement decisions have been addressed to the responsible committee, and not to the municipal assembly, may have contributed to the responsibility being perceived as lying further down in the municipal political organisation.

In accordance with the Education Act, the task of discharging the central government assignment for the school system is delegated to a committee by the municipal assembly. This is in line with the decentralisation that was

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53 National Agency for Education (1993). *Bilden av skolan 1993. Fördjupad anslagsframtällan 1994/95–1996/97* pp. 89ff.

54 National Agency for Education (1996a) *Kommunernas styrning och egenkontroll* p. 9, also described in National Agency for Education (1997a) *Ansvar för skolan – en kommunal utmaning*, p. 7.

55 Cf. Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010). *Rektors ledarskap: en granskning av hur rektor leder skolans arbete mot ökad målpuppfyllelse*. Stockholm p. 7.

intended by the municipalisation of schools.<sup>56</sup> However, an essential and fundamental principle of decentralisation is that powers and the exercise of responsibility go hand in hand. Decisions are to be made by the level that will also be able to assume responsibility for their consequences. In order for the decentralisation of authority responsibility to work, it is therefore necessary to have a functioning system of feedback upwards in the organisation, to the highest political level. This feedback is dependent on the municipal leadership seeing itself as ultimately responsible for the school system and, as the responsible authority, assuming responsibility for the state assignment. If the lower level has difficulty in fulfilling the assignment, it is the highest municipal level that has the ultimate responsibility and power to make changes in the management and organisation, and to allocate the resources needed to achieve the goals set. A prerequisite for the municipal leadership to assume this responsibility is that it evaluates and acts on results and any inadequacy in goal attainment.

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56 Govt. Bill (1988/89:4). *Om skolans utveckling och styrning*. Stockholm.

## National governance through goal and performance monitoring

The state's normative governance of schools is manifested by the objectives of the curriculum for the school system and by the various syllabuses. The Education Act requires the responsible authority to ensure that education is provided in accordance with the curriculum and other ordinances.<sup>57</sup> If the set national goals are not achieved, the responsible authority is to apply the measures needed to enable pupils in the municipality's schools to attain them. The state has gradually become increasingly active in reviewing and following up how well the school system functions.

This chapter focuses on how the state's normative governance through policy documents has been perceived and managed in the municipalities in question. This chapter also describes how the state's informational approaches to increase awareness of the policy documents have been managed.

### Adjustment of national goal documents

The municipality's schools plan has a symbolic function

The municipality's schools plan is to "make particularly clear the measures that the municipality intends to take in order to achieve the national goals set for schools".<sup>58</sup> Instead of showing how the national goals are to be achieved, the schools plans of the municipalities in this study contain a municipal vision for schools. This consists of a summary of the national goals followed by their own municipal goals.

The interviewed politicians see the schools plan more as a means to present municipal residents with a vision for the school system, rather than a starting point for efforts to realise national goals. Upon more direct questioning, the schools plan mainly proves to have a symbolic function, a policy document for marketing the municipality. "*The schools plan is mostly for showcasing the municipality's ambitions for schools,*" (*Committee Chair*). It is clear from the interviews with the politicians that the schools plans do not have the function intended by law of clarifying municipal measures to achieve the national goals.

The Head of Department level expresses differing pictures of the usefulness of the schools plan. It is seen by some as window dressing for the residents of

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57 Chapter 1, Section 4 of the Education Act (1985:1100) and Chapter 2, Section 8 of the Education Act (2010:800).

58 Chapter 2, Section 8 of the Education Act (1985:1100). This quotation is taken from the Education Act that was applicable until autumn 2010. The 2010 Education Act (2010:800) has no requirement for a municipal schools plan.

the municipality, without being rooted in the work of the schools. An example of this is frustrated statements about the differences between the content of the municipal schools plans and the actual focus of political decisions. Others see the goals of schools plans as providing a starting point for the drafting of the education department's operational plan.

### The municipality's goal documents pick and choose among the national goals

According to the interviewees, it is not the goals of the schools plan, but the goals for schools written in the annual goal and budget document for all areas of municipal operations which in practice govern the municipal school sector. These municipal goals for schools primarily consist of a few goals that are easy to measure using statistics. They are included in the municipality's combined goal documents for all operations, sometimes only as part of the budget documentation.

All the interviewees perceive the national goals for schools as extensive both in content and quantity. The national goals are seen more as a vision than actual goals for the municipality's schools. The selection of national goals in the municipal goal and budget documents appears to be determined by their high profile in national statistics.<sup>59</sup> This means that the documents include the knowledge requirements for Swedish, mathematics and English, which are necessary for entry to national programmes in upper secondary school. The knowledge requirements for years 3, 5 and 9 also receive attention with respect to the subjects measured in national tests. The interviewees describe this focus as being due to greater media coverage and public ranking of municipalities. In addition, academic performance results affect municipal resources by determining how many pupils might need a fourth year in upper secondary school. Besides these national goals with a high statistical profile, the municipalities are able to add their own goals for the school sector that are more or less related to the curriculum. Examples of such goals include increased pupil satisfaction in schools, high parental satisfaction with pre-school and out-of-school centres, high teacher participation in national in-service training, reduced staff sick leave and reduced cost per grade point.

A clear example of a complex vision concerns the management of out-of-school centres. The national goals for out-of-school centres are largely unknown at all political levels and are not a priority at the Head of Department level in the municipalities studied. This has meant that the municipal goals for out-of-school centres, if there are any, are far removed from those

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<sup>59</sup> Based on a review of the websites of the municipalities in this study.

expressed in the curriculum and in National Agency for Education general guidelines for out-of-school centres.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the perception at all municipal levels that teachers are the most important resource for pupils' learning, there are no clear municipal goals for how to evaluate and enhance teacher competence in the teaching situation. Instead it is the easily measurable pupil-teacher ratio that receives most attention and discussion in the municipalities studied. The question of whether the teacher has training in the subject is not a priority of either the department level or the political level in the municipalities included in the study. A Bachelor of Education qualification is seen as desirable, but more because it is a requirement stipulated in the Education Act than there being any ambition to raise competence levels.

### Different visions hamper communication and feedback

The existence of national goals for the municipality's schools is well known to all those interviewed. Heads of Department demonstrate a familiarity and confidence in discussing curriculum goals. Among the Committee Chairs, there is significant disparity in their understanding of curriculum goals. In practice, if they do not have a particular personal interest, the elected representatives obtain knowledge of the national goals indirectly where these are reflected in various municipal school documents or used as arguments in discussions on different committee issues. In the interviews, the municipality's highest leadership gives a picture of the school sector's goals as being heavily influenced by general descriptions and by their own or others' personal impressions.

The lack of a common understanding of the national goals makes dialogue and understanding between the lower and the higher levels of responsibility in the municipality difficult. The interviewed Heads of Department and Committee Chairs are unanimous in expressing the difficulties of gaining support and understanding for these goals higher up in the political leadership. One Head of Department describes the difficulty of communicating the national goals to the municipal leadership as follows: *"I use the curriculum to show that schools are a 'living operation', but the municipal leadership fails to grasp this,"* (Head of Department). One Committee Chair, who has extensive experience from various committees, makes this comment: *"I have been on several committees. In the Education Committee, it is fascinating how much is characterised by the politicians' own picture of their own schooling, and how little it is characterised by the regulations issued by the Riksdag, the Government and national schools*

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60 National Agency for Education (1997b). *Kvalitet i fritidshem: allmänna råd och kommentarer*. Stockholm.

agencies. This would not be the case if they had been on the Technical Services Committee, for example,” (Committee Chair).

The interviewed Heads of Department and Committee Chairs express acceptance of the municipal goals at the same time as doing their best to work towards the national goals. “*I am obliged to fulfil the municipal assignments, but I still try to pursue the state assignment,*” (Head of Department). However, one relatively new Head of Department has an active strategy to assert the national goals at the committee level. “*I am responsible for introducing the assignment that central government has placed on municipalities into the political process. It is only now that the committee understands that it does not have to make a decision that has already been made at the national political level. They do not need to invent something new,*” (Head of Department).

The existence of curriculum goals for out-of-school centres often comes as a surprise. The educational goals that apply to out-of-school centres are unknown. The defined goals are almost entirely dominated by social goals focusing on recreation and relaxation after a hard day at school.

With respect to the goal of teachers being qualified to teach and also being educated in the subjects that they teach, the higher level of municipal leadership is sometimes surprised at the question. Their belief was that it was a matter of course that teachers were qualified and educated in their subjects. Among Heads of Department and Committee Chairs, there is an understanding of the difference between how things are and how things should be. But they also have a more pragmatic attitude. While there is an ambition to achieve a higher proportion of qualified teachers, there are also comments on other factors being more important. One example is the statement: “*Who has not had a qualified lecturer who was totally useless at teaching and had supply teachers who were fantastic,*” (Committee Chair). The lack of trained teachers is sometimes explained as being difficult to solve in terms of organisation, for example in smaller schools. Other reasons concern relationships. It is better that teachers take pupils they already know in an additional subject than the pupils be given another teacher, even if the latter is trained to teach that subject.

These different visions also hamper communication between politicians and the schools. Politicians describe difficulties in achieving constructive dialogue with the teachers when visiting schools. Politicians experience that direct contact with teaching staff leads to a polarised dialogue, which they describe as being due to differing visions. While the politicians base arguments on the municipality’s goals for schools, the teachers “counter” by quoting from curricula and syllabuses. The interviews describe the teaching profession as more or less unfavourably disposed towards the municipal leadership. “*Teachers long to return to the state,*” (Committee Chair), is a quotation that illustrates

this attitude. The teaching staff are described by politicians and Municipal Chief Executives as hard to influence, difficult to manage and as having widely diverging levels of competence.

The interviews show that it can be difficult for a Head of Department and a Committee Chair to assert the curriculum goals for schools in meetings with the municipal leadership. It is instead selected national goals, together with their own municipal ones, that are the goals that receive attention.

## Four sources of performance information

It is only when performance information exists that an evaluation of goal attainment becomes possible. According to the interviewees, the performance information that forms the basis for knowledge concerning municipal goal attainment comes mainly from four sources. Of these, two are external, Öppna jämförelser (“Open Comparisons”) published by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)<sup>61</sup> and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate’s inspection report for the municipality. The two internal sources of performance information mentioned are the municipality’s central monitoring system and, mentioned less regularly in the interviews, the municipality’s quality reports for schools.

### External sources of information

SALAR’s annual statistical compilation “Open Comparisons” is the predominant external source of information for a municipality to evaluate its goal attainment. This is read by politicians and officials at all levels and is described as the most important form of external information. It appears, however, that it is not the report itself that is being referred to, but the table in its Appendix 4. This appendix, based on statistics from the National Agency for Education, ranks each municipality on the basis of a number of resource and performance indicators from the best to the worst municipality. The list shows the individual municipality’s ranking and the change in ranking from the previous year for the selected performance and resource indicators.<sup>62</sup> The higher political level appreciates the fact that SALAR’s Open Comparisons provides an accessible

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61 The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions produces annual reports making open comparisons of public health, healthcare, compulsory school, upper secondary school, safety and security, elderly care and other social services. The reports present these operations with a focus on performance broken down by county council or municipality. See e.g. Feldt, Joakim (ed.) (2010). *Öppna jämförelser. Grundskola 2010*. Stockholm: Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

62 Performance indicators relate to school leavers’ grades, subject test results and the *Nutidsorientering competition – a test on knowledge of current events – run by the newspaper DN*. The resource indicators relate to costs per pupil and staff costs.

overview of the situation and of the status in relation to other municipalities. *"I am an economist and not an expert on schools. I look at SALAR's summaries,"* (Chair of the Executive Committee). The lower political level, the education committee, sees the comparisons as an opportunity, in the event of a low ranking, to justify its need for additional resources. *"That we are not well placed in Open Comparisons is one of our arguments, when we see in black and white where we are in relation to other municipalities,"* (Committee Chair).

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's inspection report for the municipality is the other external report that receives special attention according to the interviewees. It is perceived to have an accessible structure and to clearly indicate the areas in which criticism is directed towards the municipality. Even though the criticism is negative, the report is still valued. *"Being criticised gives us the chance to improve,"* (Head of Department). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's inspection report is perceived to give a clear picture of the municipality's schools which everyone can relate to. *"The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's impartial view is good for the sake of balance,"* (Chair of the Executive Committee). The higher municipal leadership views the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's municipality report as particularly important for acquiring an objective picture of the conditions in the municipality's schools and in the education department. The committee politicians can read the reports to use the criticism to assign tasks to the Head of Department and as a basis for requesting more money from the municipal executive committee. *"Good that the Inspectorate performs a quality audit; we can refer to it and get more resources,"* (Committee Chair). The Head of Department often sees it as an aid to bring about changes to activities in schools, sometimes drastic ones. *"The inspection has led to one head no longer being here,"* (Head of Department).

Information from the National Agency for Education is described as having an indirect and more varied function. It is mainly used by Heads of Department and Committee Chairs for information purposes. These make more or less regular visits to the Agency website to "see what is going on" and to access the national results that are reported. The Agency newsletter is mentioned, although they cannot always distinguish between the various newsletters received from different authorities. Awareness of the Agency's annual situation assessments is more varied. These are read carefully by some Heads of Department and Committee Chairs, while others haven't noticed them at all. At the higher political level, the situation assessments are not known about. With the odd exception, the Agency's evaluation reports describing and analysing the causes of high-profile problems have not been read by the interviewed politicians and Heads of Department. However, media attention may lead to the content of Agency reports being known and discussed in the municipality.

This is particularly true if the local press asks questions about the situation in the municipality's schools compared with the national problem scenario.

### Internal sources of information

Internally, it is through municipal monitoring and audits that all those concerned obtain a picture of the situation within the municipality's operational areas, including the school system. From the interviews, we can see that it is the municipal monitoring linked to the budget that is ultimately decisive for the perception of the school system in the municipality. Here, the politicians can access school performance information at an aggregated level, where a municipal value is given as a percentage of a goal value set by the municipality. The higher political levels describe this as a good way of obtaining an overview of the performance of municipal operations. For the Head of Department and for the committee, it is a way of demonstrating that they have fulfilled their responsibilities. Their focus is firstly on clarifying how they have performed the task of keeping within the allocated budget and, secondly, on highlighting whether and how they have succeeded in improving performance in the aspects that are measured.

According to one particular ordinance, quality reports by the municipality are to contain an assessment of the extent to which the national goals for education have been realised and a presentation of the measures that the municipality and the individual school, pre-school or out-of-school centre intend to take to improve goal attainment.<sup>63</sup> One of the state's objectives is that the responsible authorities will thus acquire knowledge of the school performance and on this basis determine the scale and priorities of measures required to achieve the national goals. The municipality's quality reports receive attention at the department and committee level, but how high in the political hierarchy they reach differs between the municipalities interviewed. *"Quality reports are discussed by the committee and are not passed on to the assembly. They only get fundamentally important decisions, such as school vouchers and if, for example, we are considering a school closure," (Committee Chair).*

There is also a third internal channel of information for politicians and Heads of Department to "find out how things are". This consists of conversations with parents or employees who have information or who wish to give their opinions. The more politicians are involved in schools, the more they seem use these informal channels. The aim might be to learn more or to check on a problem situation for themselves. *"I am a representative of the population*

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63 Ordinance (1997:702) on Quality Reports in the Education System, cf. National Agency for Education (1999b). *Skolverkets allmänna råd om kvalitetsredovisning inom skolväsendet*. Stockholm.

– *I pop out sometimes and talk to head teachers and teachers, without the Head of Department knowing.*” (Committee Chair). These conversations might be initiated by the politicians themselves or they might also be approached by people wanting to pass on information. “*Parents who are not satisfied contact me,*” (Committee Chair).

## What is measured matters

The impact of performance information is dependent upon its design and its degree of urgency to the municipal leadership. Politicians often receive information about schools in the form of figures and diagrams. Although these are presented within a textual context, it appears it is the figures that have an impact.

The strong municipal interest in SALAR’s annual report “Open Comparisons” may serve to illustrate how figures in practice have the upper hand over words. Although SALAR’s report contains a large amount of descriptive and analytical text, it is the ranked municipal tables that are the main focus of the interviewees.

SALAR’s Open Comparisons also involves the National Agency for Education’s SALSA model.<sup>64</sup> By taking into account schools’ pupil compositions, the aim of the model is to provide the municipality with a new basis for discussion and analysis of schools’ circumstances, processes and performance. However, it is not uncommon for interviewees at all levels of responsibility to use the SALSA values to explain why some schools’ specific circumstances conditions bring down municipal performance. They defend the situation by saying that even if the school’s goal attainment is low, the school is close to its SALSA values. In this way, schools’ low goal attainment is perceived as something to be expected and hence normal. “*We cannot do anything about the parents’ background,*” (Committee Chair). SALSA can then have the unintended effect of justifying the absence of further efforts.

It appears that it is the internal follow-up of the budget in relation to the set municipal goals that is of greatest significance for the municipal schools policy. The description of performance is concise and mainly based on figures. The primary focus is on numerical values set in relation to previous years. It is this situation that becomes the starting point for any changes in objectives.

To some extent, more qualitatively oriented documents also have an impact. Appreciation for the Swedish Schools Inspectorate’s inspection report is due to the fact that it describes municipality’s own schools, but also due to its accessi-

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64 The SALSA value takes into account schools’ pupil compositions and calculates a value for expected performance with respect to pupil knowledge based on the following background factors: pupils’ results and their parents’ level of education, foreign background and the proportion of boys.

bility in the form of cross tabulations that show whether measures are needed. There are some Heads of Department who refer to certain research findings that have received media attention when they discuss the causes of pupils' low academic results. The higher level of municipal responsibility refers to the media focus on pupils' low academic performance, but not to the explanations put forward by research and national evaluation studies.

### Teachers as a resource

The discussion on teachers as a resource is an example that illustrates that it is what is measured is that gets noticed. Although teachers are seen as important for goal attainment, the interest is more quantitative than qualitative. Despite all levels of responsibility agreeing that it is the teacher's teaching that is decisive for pupils' learning, there is no systematic follow-up of the quality of teacher's teaching. This is shown by the fact that the municipal assessment instruments always measure the pupil-teacher ratio and rarely qualifications, but seldom whether teachers are trained in their subjects. The concept of pupil-teacher ratios is perceived as a simple measurement for everyone to relate to. It is therefore something of a lowest common denominator in the dialogue between the lower and higher political levels. As a result, knowledge of the proportion of teachers who are trained in the subject in which they teach is unclear<sup>65</sup>, as is the picture of the teachers' actual teaching competence.

### The quality of out-of-school centres

Evaluation of out-of-school centres in relation to the national goals of the curriculum and to the quality objectives specified in National Agency for Education general guidelines for out-of-school centres is largely non-existent among all those interviewed. Out-of-school centres are a low priority area and receive little attention. The goal is broadly perceived as giving the children a relaxing time of recreation following their work at school. *"In the municipal operations, it is not as if parents are crying out for more educational activities. They want safe and secure childcare while they are at work. All they want is for the children to be clean, happy and in one piece when they pick them up,"* (Committee Chair). There is no systematic quality evaluation of out-of-school centres. Instead, it is the parents that are seen as a gauge of quality. The absence of criticism from parents can thus be taken as evidence that a centre is operating satisfactorily.

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<sup>65</sup> After the interviews were conducted, the Government issued the Ordinance (2011:326) on the Qualification and Authorisation of Teachers and Pre-school Teachers, which introduced requirements for a Bachelor of Education qualification and training in the subject taught. The assessment that this will require should increase the knowledge among those responsible on teacher qualifications in the municipality.

The interviews were preceded by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's examination of out-of-school centres. At the same time, there was media coverage of the National Agency for Education's criticism of shortcomings in out-of-school centres for 10-12-year-olds. For this reason, the interviewed Heads of Department and Committee Chairs might have had an increased awareness of the marginalised situation of out-of-school centres. There are also those who had seen increased group sizes and lower staffing levels in out-of-school centres as a problem, and regret their inability to do more for the sector. *"When we found out that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was coming, we looked for it (information on group sizes). That was when we saw it. It was up for discussion, but nothing has happened since then. When you see the figures, you feel ashamed,"* (Committee Chair). The Heads of Department are those who are most aware of the situation. They describe out-of-school centres as being given little attention, partly due to tradition and the fact that attention and resources have been focused on schools. However, the Heads of Department who have visited out-of-school centres do not feel they have problems. There are also Heads of Department who question the National Agency for Education's criticism of both quality and group sizes. Among other things, they consider the notion that staffing levels are too low to be based on problems of statistical presentation, due to staff working both in schools and out-of-school centres.

## Expecting the status quo

The statistical data for the municipalities in question demonstrates, with one exception, no tendency towards improvement in academic performance over the last ten years. The funding that municipalities inject into the school system and the achievement of national goals vary considerably among the different municipalities in this study.<sup>66</sup> The fact that the situation remains largely unchanged from year to year is noted by the interviewees. *"We lose one in ten pupils. Only reach 90 per cent. It stands still from year to year."* and *"We are constantly treading water at 90 per cent". This is often explained as something normal. "Our city is not a traditional city of education" (Committee Chair), "It's due to the area's historical and demographic background" (Head of Department).* The levels

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66 This is the range in operational metrics (2009) among the studied municipalities for out-of-school centres: Child per annual full-time employee between 17 and 38 and the cost per out-of-school centre child between 20 000 and 48 000. For compulsory school, the range for teachers per 100 pupils is between 9.4 and 7.3, for teachers with a Bachelor of Education degree between 98 and 84 per cent, for teaching cost per pupil between 38 000 and 45 000. Goal attainment for the proportion of pupils not achieving the goals is between 15 and 40 per cent, and in terms of upper secondary entry requirements between 95 and 82 per cent. Municipal cost for school/adult education per municipal resident ranges between SEK 13 000 and 18 000.

of funding that the municipality supplies to the school system, and which are expressed in terms of e.g. pupil-teacher ratio or cost per pupil, also remain unchanged from year to year. The explanations given refer to municipal conditions or municipal tradition. *“Our municipality is a low-tax municipality, that is why we have a high pupil-teacher ratio,”* (Committee Chair). According to the interviews, this largely unchanged pattern of performance year after year leads to expectations that the pattern will be repeated. Shortcomings in relation to the national goals do not generally receive attention unless they significantly deviate from the corresponding results from the previous year.

When there are changes in the pupils’ academic performance, the interviewees often find it difficult to explain the cause. *“Head teachers say it can vary according to intake year,”* (Head of Department). The only concrete initiative that an interviewee associates with improved academic performance results is summer school, an activity that lies outside the regular school system. In one case, there is an example of committee criticism having led to the department leadership taking measures resulting in improvements. *“Maths was weak in the national tests for year 3. We ran a maths initiative. The Diamond Project and professional development for teachers. There was a dramatic improvement from 70 to 90 per cent,”* (Head of Department).

The changes that occur in conditions in the school sector are often explained by structural factors. A decline in pupil numbers has in some municipalities led to a lower pupil-teacher ratio. This has also led to a greater proportion of qualified teachers, since it is the unqualified teachers who have had to leave. However, there is one example of effects resulting from action by the municipal assembly. This relates to extra resources for improving the pupil-teacher ratio, caused by a very low position in SALAR’s Open Comparisons.

With respect to the performance metrics that the municipal leadership has decided for the school system, it is common to set the percentage values just above those achieved, to thereby achieve gradual improvements in performance. *“We have set our sights on 100 per cent, but to avoid setbacks, we at the municipality put 90 per cent,”* (Head of Department). In those cases where there is a marked negative deviation in performance, the committee level might instruct the Head of Department to take countermeasures to stem a declining trend.

## Focus on national averages

Something conspicuous in the interviews is the way in which municipal performance is placed in relation to that of other municipalities. This is illustrated by desired performance levels being placed in relation to the average for all Sweden’s municipalities, as presented by SALAR’s Open Comparisons. Also

calculations of the need for resources to schools can be based on a comparison with other municipalities. *“What matters most is not the results themselves, but how we are doing in relation to other municipalities in terms of cost per pupil,”* (Committee Chair).

According to the interviews, in those cases where the municipality’s performance is below the national average for comparable municipalities, this has mainly entailed calls from the municipal leadership for the committee to work towards improved goal attainment. At the same time, the interviews show that ambitions can fall the closer municipal performance is to the national average. However, the national average is well below the performance levels set by the state as the minimum goals for pupil knowledge.

Sometimes, a low ranking is turned into a positive. For example, one Municipal Chief Executive compares a low position in SALAR’s Open Comparisons for the pupil-teacher ratio with a not quite so low position for academic performance and interprets this as showing that their municipality has better teacher effectiveness than other municipalities.

## **Inadequate goal attainment – the responsibility of others**

Common to all those interviewed, regardless of post, is the view that the national goals have been set too high. They are not even considered possible to achieve. *“You are not allowed to take children out of the equation, which is clear from the documents, but that is not reasonable. The goals are not realistic,”* (Committee Chair). However, the reasons for the goals being considered unattainable differ somewhat among the different actors. Heads of Department mainly speak of the impossibility as being due to insufficient resources. Representatives of the municipal leadership insist that the goals have been set too high for all pupils to be able to attain them.

There is an underlying frustration among representatives of the municipal leadership about the lack of improvement in low performance despite the yearly emphasis on wanting to see an improvement. It is also possible to discern a certain resignation, partly based on the difficulty in ascertaining the effects of implemented initiatives. Municipal leaderships also express amazement that goal attainment is not higher despite the school system laying claim to a large portion of the municipal budget. One explanation given is that performance is dependent on the competence of teachers: *“But you cannot fire teachers because they do not succeed, like they do in the sporting world,”* (Municipal Chief Executive).

The interviews with politicians and administrative staff in the municipal leadership demonstrate that they do not see themselves as involved in the

problem. Solving problems is a task for the education committee. Shortcomings in the school system and in pupil results are seen as a pressing matter for the underlying committee to deal with according to the prerequisites it has been given. But when the highest ranking politicians and Municipal Chief Executives have occasion to reflect in the interviews on the implications of large groups in out-of-school centres and high pupil-teacher ratios, they express ideas that relate to the aims of the national goal documents. *“What drives me is that schools should be able to help children who do not have support at home; they should be able to climb the social ladder. After all, schools are supposed to be compensatory,”* (Chair of the Executive Committee).

According to the interviews, when the municipal leadership has acted to counteract shortcomings in the school system, this has taken place as the result of external criticism from the local media. This applies, for example, to problems with bullying or journalistic investigations into the quality of school meals. When direct measures to improve pupil learning are requested, the examples given by the interviewees almost exclusively relate to the basic skills of the younger years – reading, writing and arithmetic. The measure is then usually a result of it being initiated at state level and associated with financial support from central government.

Despite poor municipal values relative to the national average, the interviews do not raise any examples of strong measures from the higher political leadership to strengthen the quality of schools and improve the pupils’ academic performance. This absence of measures may be compared with the municipal leadership’s positive marketing of its schools in brochures and on the municipality website. Despite a consistently low ranking in SALAR’s Open Comparisons, one municipality advertises itself as the best schools municipality in the region. Another municipality’s website guarantees its residents that the municipality’s schools have “qualified teachers with high competence”, while year after year the municipality is among the worst in the SALAR ranking for the proportion of teachers with a degree in education.

At the committee and Head of Department level, there is a view that, despite inadequate goal attainment, there can be no criticism for this, since the conditions for schools are decided higher up in the municipal hierarchy. This means that the assignment is mainly described as a matter of carrying out operations at the current level as best one can and, when opportunities arise, trying to improve the quality. The difficulties in providing systematic feedback and achieving support among the municipal leadership mean that the situation is described as deadlocked and difficult to change.

## Summary and discussion

### National goals are selected and municipal goals are added

The goals that become part of the studied municipalities' overall goal and budget documentation are those that, according to the interviews, in practice govern decisions on the municipal school system. Here, the goals included are partly a selection of national goals and partly municipal goals in addition to these. The national goals for schools that receive most attention from the municipal leadership are predominantly the knowledge requirements that also draw national focus and are followed by the media. There is a strong tendency to make use of the metrics that are comparable between municipalities and that appear in SALAR's Open Comparisons. These metrics are of course valuable and important starting points for the municipality's knowledge of the situation. The problem arises when these metrics alone are also used to measure goal attainment.

Overall, the interviews give a picture of the national goals being chosen on the basis of municipal priorities. The perception that there are many national goals may make it difficult to discern in policy documents which of these the state has established as priorities and guidelines for the school system as a whole. The lack of clarity in these respects may mean that it requires a particularly active initiative from the municipal leadership to gain insight into these primary goals, something which is fundamental for exercising responsibility for schools. In addition, there may also be a lack of clarity in the policy documents. An example of this is the lack of explicit goals for out-of-school centres, something which has probably contributed to their decline in quality and marginalisation without attracting attention.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the focus on pupil-teacher ratios may have obscured a focus on setting goals for teacher qualifications and actual teaching skills and competence. If the governing politicians do not have a basis for assessing the quality of the school system, this may contribute to a greater emphasis on their own priorities and objectives. These may in practice compete with or counteract the national goals.<sup>68</sup>

### National goals perceived to solely concern professionals

The basis for the municipality's authority responsibility for schools is knowledge of the fundamental central government requirements on the quality of schools and their goals. National governance is exercised partly through the responsible authorities and partly through head teachers and teachers. This

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67 National Agency for Education (2010). *Utveckling pågår: Om kvalitetsarbete i fritidshem*. Stockholm p. 5.

68 SOU 2007:28 p. 66.

dual national governance risks being erroneously perceived as two parallel missions without any relationship between them. This means that the municipal leadership might see itself as the recipient of financial resources from central government, while the national goals expressed in the Education Act and curricula are perceived to be a concern solely for the professionals – head teachers and teachers. There is much in the interviews to suggest that this perception has governed the highest leadership's view of the municipal school system. The lower political level sometimes also expresses this view. Thus, the national governance in the form of normative goals, formulated in the curriculum, is trapped at a lower level of municipal operations. This may lead to passivism in the political governance of the school sector, which will then not make use of the opportunity to govern through organisation and to utilise resources to ensure the quality of the teaching staff's capacity to achieve the national goals in their professional role.<sup>69</sup>

### Lowering of performance requirements

Even if the national goals are reduced to a few, statistically quantifiable goals, these could acquire a powerful governing effect if the national requirements levels that accompany the goals also become municipal requirements levels. As the interviews clearly show, this is not the case. In the municipalities studied, the way they deal with them is by significantly reducing the requirements levels – levels that differ from municipality to municipality. This is illustrated in actions based on the information that not all pupils attain the basic knowledge requirements, that is, they do not obtain a final grade in the subject. Instead of asserting the national requirements level that means all pupils are to be given the conditions to attain the goals, the municipal goal level is lowered. To evaluate municipal performance, national averages are used as a reference for assessment. However, the goal level is primarily determined by municipal tradition, that is, the level normally achieved in the municipality. The requirements levels contained in the national goal documents are rather described as having a visionary function, something that may hopefully be achieved in the long term. The interviews indicate that the national governance function has in practice been taken over by SALAR's Open Comparisons. This is supported by research that has highlighted the problem of local preferences eliminating nationally established criteria, something which may lead to the national criteria not being taken into account in local decision-making.<sup>70</sup>

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69 Cf. Fredriksson, Anders (2010). *Marknaden och lärarna: hur organiseringen av skolan påverkar lärares offentliga tjänstemannaskap*. Göteborg: Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.

70 Greiff, Camilo von (2009) p. 98

## Greater focus on results than on analysis of the causes

Fundamental to the idea of goal and performance management is that if performance is not consistent with the goals, the responsible authority has the responsibility to make changes to the operations or their conditions so that the objectives can then be achieved. The interviews demonstrate the difficulties that departments and committees have in getting the municipal leadership to focus on their descriptions of the situation of schools in relation to curriculum goals. There is a danger that the focus of the municipal executive committee stops at national schools statistics. This may mean that the focus for future action is on shortcomings in performance rather than on an analysis of their causes.

An approach found among the interviewed politicians and Heads of Department entails placing the solution to the problems in the school sector outside the sphere of municipal politics, that is, with the professionals in schools or the state. The interviews show that the responsibility for solving the problem of pupils' inadequate knowledge can be shifted lower down in the system, via the committee to the Head of Department to the head teacher. At the same time, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's quality audits, for example, demonstrate that head teachers do not have the capacity and prerequisites to prioritise pedagogical leadership and other parts of their national assignment.<sup>71</sup>

In that central government has set goals for the school system, the interviews express both demands and hopes that central government will contribute, for example through extra grants, to improvements in the municipality's schools to enable the national goals to be achieved.

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71 Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010) p. 8.

## The municipality's financial responsibility

In a municipality, it is the highest leadership, the municipal assembly, that is responsible for the financing of pre-schools, school-age child care, schools and adult education for its residents. Municipalities receive central government grants for running the school system. Central government grants for schools do not constitute a separate item, but are included in the general grant from central government. By means of an equalisation system, central government attempts to create more equitable financial conditions for Sweden's municipalities. It aims to compensate for differences in tax bases and expenditure needs with three forms of grant. The income equalisation grant, which is the largest, aims to equalise differences in tax capacity. The cost equalisation grant is intended to compensate for structural costs that the municipality itself is unable to influence. The structural grant is intended to strengthen municipalities with a small population and/or a problematic labour market. Together, these government grants constitute an average of approximately 15 per cent of the municipalities' total revenues.<sup>72</sup>

The state's financial governance of schools can be described as very withdrawn, in that the grants for the school system are an unspecified part of the general grant from central government. It is the task of every municipality as responsible authority to provide the school system with the resources deemed necessary to achieve the goals set in acts and ordinances. Some national governance is exercised through special central government grants for stimulating the responsible authorities to strengthen certain parts of the school system that are considered to be neglected from a national perspective. These specifically targeted funds are usually for a specific time period and thus temporary. They may also be described as marginal since, together, they represent only a few per cent of the municipal budget for the school system. This means that the targeted central government grants can primarily be seen as a national governance of the system's focus.

The previous chapter discussed the issue of financing for the school system. This chapter provides a more detailed description of how the studied municipalities allocate resources to the school system on the basis of their overall financial assets.

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72 Dahlberg, Matz & Rattsø, Jørn (2010). *Statliga bidrag till kommunerna: i princip och praktik*. Stockholm: Ministry of Finance, Government Offices p. 51.

## Allocation according to municipal tradition

The municipal assembly's system for allocating resources to operations is similar in all the surveyed municipalities. Based on the previous financial year's deficit or surplus, adjustments are made upwards or downwards. This is true generally for all operations. Thereafter, specific initiatives are implemented in areas of municipal operations prioritised by the municipal executive committee. The basis for this is what is often referred to as the "municipal benefit". One municipality's budget documentation puts it like this: "The best interests of our municipality take precedence over the wants and needs of the various operations".

A part of the municipal benefit concept is that no area of operations is to be prioritised over another. A strong investment in schools may be perceived as a threat by other committees. *"The Heads of Department must do their best with the resources they have. They have to make objective assessments, and not only look to their own needs. There are to be no conflicts,"* (Municipal Chief Executive).

When a municipality takes as its starting point the previous year's allocation of resources, this may in practice result in the allocation of resources to the various committees being proportionally equal from one year to another. This leads to a standardised allocation of the same budget share from year to year without a prior analysis of needs. *"It works on a routine basis here in the municipality. Resources are allocated without an evaluation of needs,"* (Head of Department). However, the share allocated to the school sector differs significantly between municipalities. *"The allocation of money depends on tradition; here the Social Welfare Committee has always been a little stronger,"* (Committee Chair). A certain amount of the disparity between Sweden's municipalities in their investment in schools, expressed as cost per pupil, can be explained by structural factors such as the average distance between residents or level of education. The largest part of the variation, 65 per cent, cannot be explained by structural factors such as how segregated housing is, the proportion of pupils born abroad, tax capacity or the political majority in the assembly. The differences are therefore due to causes that cannot be identified by means of available statistical data.<sup>73</sup> Parents' level of education, which is strongly linked to school grades also at the municipal level, is not an explanation for the variation between municipalities in terms of cost per pupil in compulsory school. The fact that none or only a very small part of the variation is explained by socio-economic factors indicates that the resources for compulsory and pre-school allocated in each municipality are not primarily based on an assessment of the

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73 National Agency for Education (2009). *Resursfördelning utifrån förutsättningar och behov?* Stockholm pp. 29f.

schools' capacity to achieve the national goals, but has other causes, for example different levels of ambition, different awareness of costs or previous budget history.<sup>74</sup> These disparities between municipalities may gradually become so great that they are perceived as impossible to do anything about. "*If we were to lower the pupil-teacher ratio in our municipality to the average national level, it would cost 18 million. It gives politicians quite a start when they realise that,*" (Head of Department).

The interviews describe the budget process in two ways. It is described in some municipalities as traditional and predetermined. "*The allocation of resources between social and school issues has been exactly the same over time,*" (Chair of the Municipal Assembly). In others, it is described as a battle that has winners and losers. "*The allocation of money in the municipal executive committee is a wrestling match. Social services currently have great needs. Schools have taken a beating,*" (Municipal Chief Executive). Just before the interviews were conducted, central government had given municipalities an extra grant to offset the previous year's severe austerity measures caused by the global economic crisis. Some of the municipalities had prioritised schools in this additional allocation. However, the interviewees were careful to point out that this has only meant a return to the situation that existed before the economic crisis. In other municipalities, schools drew a blank: "*Of the extra money from central government, 2 out of 17 million went to schools. The savings requirement of 9 million was reduced to 7 million (3.4 million of the cost cutting is attributable to a reduction in the number of pupils),*" (Committee Chair).

The interviewees feel that what it has been possible to do with existing municipal financial procedures has been done. They see a change to a starting point where every budget is set after an unconditional assessment of the committees' various needs as desirable but unrealistic. None sees utilisation of the right of municipal taxation by increasing the municipal tax rate as politically viable.<sup>75</sup> Reference to central government requirements for a balanced budget explains the impossibility of underfinancing the municipal budget. For this reason, the interviewees see increased central government grants as the only possibility in practice for providing the municipal school system with greater resources.

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74 National Agency for Education (2009) pp. 86f.

75 Cf. Nihlfors, Elisabet (2003). *Skolchefen i skolans styrning och ledning*. Diss. Uppsala University p. 219.

## Different views on resource needs in schools

The view of financial resources as a means of improving performance differs among the various levels of responsibility. Among the higher municipal leadership, there is frustration over the size of the financial investment in schools in relation to what is gained from it. One Municipal Chief Executive says that *“schools are a black hole that devours money without you being able to see where it goes,”* (Municipal Chief Executive). A leading politician expresses the same frustration. *“Schools get the resources they need. You should get more for the money,”* (Chair of the Executive Committee). Moreover, the higher political and administrative levels frequently use the argument that “it is not about money” to justify not providing schools with more money. When asked what then it is about, the responses are consistently that “it is up to the teachers”. *“We get too little in return for what we invest in teachers,”* (Municipal Chief Executive). The responses to the follow-up question of how teachers are to be able to increase goal attainment vary greatly. The response from politicians and Municipal Chief Executives is more focused on attracting “good new teachers” to the municipality than on developing the competence of existing ones. While the municipal leadership regrets the situation, it does not see it as its task to take action, but refers this to the responsible committee. It is noticeable from the interviews with the highest municipal leadership that there is a certain resignation regarding the possibility of improving the situation of the municipality’s schools in the near future. They also express an attitude of wanting to keep a certain distance to the school system. One Municipal Chief Executive describes it like this: *“When I attend meetings of Municipal Chief Executives, we have one thing in common. We avoid talking about schools. Why? Well, everyone has problems with schools and everyone is so tired of nothing happening,”* (Municipal Chief Executive).

Further down in the municipal hierarchy, the Committee Chairs and Heads of Department emphasise to a greater degree the lack of financial resources as the root cause of low goal attainment. *“If the municipal assembly does not provide the financial resources, nothing will happen,”* (Head of Department). While the higher political leadership emphasises the opportunities that should exist within the large school budget, Committee Chairs often look on their relatively large budget with an element of frustration. One Committee Chair quotes the comment that usually accompanies an assignment from the municipal assembly: *“With such a big budget, you must be able to find the money somewhere,”* (Committee Chair). Another Committee Chair, who wanted to request money to implement an initiative, describes the same situation. *“I need to go to the municipal leadership and ask for more money. But they reply, “You have already got 1.2 billion, you can take some of that. There must be*

*a lot of savings that can be made in the administration.” But that is not the case,”* (Committee Chair). At the same time, the perception among other Committee Chairs is that they have enough resources since these are sufficient to maintain ongoing operations.

One Head of Department says he has tried to increase the school’s share of municipal resources by *“drumming in, on the strength of SALAR’s Open Comparisons, that the municipality is very far down the list in terms of allocated resources per pupil”*. However, the consequence has been a conflict that means the politicians avoid talking about goal attainment with him.

One problem for the Committee Chairs is that despite a very extensive budget, they are only able to implement savings in the parts over which the committee has influence. A large part of school finances consists of components that cannot be influenced, such as rents. Other parts of the budget, such as costs for school meals, are delicate topics in the media. The interviews show that savings hit areas that affect the quality of teaching, such as teaching materials, the pupil-teacher ratio and professional development. In addition, the situation may be aggravated by other committees managing their savings requirements in ways that affect the school system. This might be reduced cleaning, higher rents or reduced social support for pupils in and outside school. New initiatives, such as the IT initiative, also influence the committee’s framework budget. *“Computerisation is the cuckoo in the nest. It costs a lot of money to keep schools up to date,”* (Committee Chair).

The discrepancy between municipalities’ marketing of schools and their actual budget priorities gives rise to the occasional caustic remark. *“Our municipal leadership refers to balanced finances. Freezes everything. Schools suffer. All the while, we are marketed as the region’s best schools municipality,”* (Head of Department).

The lower municipal level, represented by Committee Chairs and Heads of Department, consistently describes the decisive obstacle to obtaining increased resources as the lack of motivation in the municipal leadership to familiarise itself with and understand the school sector and national objectives. The municipality’s quality reports could be used as a “common denominator” for dialogue, but these are designed and used very differently from municipality to municipality. The reports seem to live their own lives, without being rooted in the higher municipal leadership. One of the causes given is that the quality reports are in practice free from the municipality’s own overall description of operations and are also not linked to budgetary targets. *“The goals of the quality reports are not linked to financial goals. It is therefore difficult to get understanding for them among the municipal leadership,”* (Committee Chair). Another factor that makes it difficult for the Education Committee to assert itself in the municipal budget process is that the school year does not correspond to the

budget year. *“Complicated by the fact that the school year is not the budget year. We are unable to see pupil performance and results for the current year, but for last year,”* (Committee Chair). The municipal assembly’s adoption of the budget is described as a more or less formal process. In this way, reflection based on the content of the quality reports goes no further than the lower political level, usually at department level.

## A zero-sum game

Despite a relatively large school budget, committee chairs rarely report any possibility to implement the financial investments that they view as necessary to significantly improve goal attainment. In addition, they perceive the possibilities to reallocate resources within the allocated framework as exhausted. For example, transferring resources from schools to restore the level of resources in lower priority areas, such as out-of-school centres, is seen as out of the question because schools are viewed as a priority. Another example of this deadlock is that the lack of resources for schools with pupils needing support is ascribed to it not being possible to transfer resources from schools that function and perform well.

In practice, it is only possible for the committee to improve quality in the sector through various forms of transfer within the particular remit. *“The committee cannot make new decisions without them being financed. Only allocate within the framework,”* (Head of Department). This means, for example, that resources are taken from lower profile areas, such as out-of-school centres. As one Head of Department puts it: *“Out-of-school centres have become a good cash cow when savings need to be made,”* (Head of Department). The increasing size of groups in out-of-school centres is consistently explained by schools requiring more and more resources within the allocated budget frame.

There are also examples of a kind of zero-sum game, where the municipal assembly provides extra resources for the school system for implementing an ordained initiative with one hand, but imposes general cost cutting requirements with the other. *“First, the municipal assembly decides not to fully compensate us for inflation and wage increases. Then they give us an extra grant. When the local newspaper calls and wonders what we plan to do with the extra school grant, I cannot say that it will be used to fill the gap caused by the municipal assembly’s first decision. So I have to make something up,”* (Committee Chair).

The only possibility of significantly improving goal attainment that committee politicians and Heads of Department express in the interviews is to obtain financial resources beyond current levels to be able to prioritise neglected areas of the school system. This would be through increased central government grants. This solution is expressed by one Committee Chair in a

clear manner as follows. *“If Stockholm wants something done, they will have to send money for it,”* (Committee Chair). Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of such central government funds being “earmarked” so as not to risk disappearing in the municipal budget process.

The municipal leadership does not focus not on financial resources as the solution. In the cases where these are mentioned, it is in conjunction with the municipality receiving resources beyond those budgeted. Then extra investments in quality in schools could be made. *“The groups in out-of-school centres are large. As soon as the economy turns around, we will invest in them,”* (Chair of the Executive Committee).

Committee Chairs express an attitude of primarily maintaining the current situation. Although the mass media, their own monitoring and quality reports, as well as inspections have given them an increasing awareness of what needs to be done to improve goal attainment, they also realise that it is difficult to acquire support higher up in the municipal leadership for the profound changes that are needed. It is against this background that Committee Chairs make statements about “playing the game” instead, that is, not protesting and thereby “behaving disloyally”, but rather trying to “work miracles”. The committee level attempts to act through its department on the basis of existing conditions. This also applies to municipalities with a very low ranking relative to others. The situation becomes one of the committee, based on a standardised allocation of financial resources, assuming the responsibility of responsible authority and relying on the knowledge and interpretation of the department level, something which may lead to the committee adopting a passive, wait-and-see attitude instead of taking action. The interviews indicate that this situation, where the power over resource allocation, the exercise of responsibility and knowledge rest with different municipal levels, contributes heavily to the prevention of an integrated municipal management of the school sector.

Overall, the interviews with Committee Chairs point to an ambition to improve the system. A salient feature, however, is a frustration about only being able to make changes at detail level because resource allocation has already long been locked into main priorities. In a situation where the committee feels unable to prioritise current needs within the allocated framework, the interviews show that the responsibility to set priorities is shifted to the Head of Department and in some cases further down to the level of head teacher.

## Shortcomings lead to requests for national support

According to interviews, the difficulties of the committee level regarding feedback and dialogue with the municipal leadership have led to a situation where the focus is on maintaining the current situation and managing any crises that arise. The polarised situation between the higher and lower municipal levels has thus in practice been toned down in favour of a common position that if more money is to be allocated to the municipal school system, then this has to come in the form of extra grants from central government.

Although the state grant to the school system does not constitute a separate item, the interviews express more or less clearly a view that the state has not given municipalities the financial resources required to carry out the central government assignment for schools. *“If central government wants us to do more, they will have to send more money,”* (Head of Department). In line with this, interviewees express satisfaction that central government, at the time of the interview, had just provided the municipality with special central government grants for the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic in order to help improve goal attainment. The interviews demonstrate accordingly that major special measures by municipalities to improve goal attainment occur almost exclusively when central government has taken the initiative and provided extra grants for their implementation.

The interviewees say that any drive to improve the basic quality of schools, for example in the form of smaller groups in out-of-school centres and a higher proportions of qualified teachers, also requires extra financial resources. It is not considered possible to provide these through reallocations in the municipal budget, since other operations would then suffer. According to the interviewees, their hope therefore lies with external initiatives from central government or with a stronger future municipal budget.

## Summary and discussion

### Resource allocation according to tradition

The traditional standardised allocation from the municipal assembly to the committees may be a factor that prevents the municipal leadership from involving itself in the understanding of its school system and the schools' problems in achieving the national goals. There is no incentive to use feedback on performance to link goal attainment with resource allocation, since the exercise of responsibility for the schools' achievement of the national goals is given to a committee further down in the organisation.

Consistent with this, the quality reports on the school system mandated by central government are, according to the interviews, also not used as a basis for the municipal assembly's allocation of resources. That the municipal budget for schools is not placed in relation to a goal-related systematic evaluation of the school system is not a new situation. This lack of current adequate documentation has been noted in several studies by the National Agency for Education since the early 1990s.<sup>76</sup> The interviews confirm the absence of broad operations-based background documentation when the municipal leadership is to assess what resources the school system needs to achieve the national goals.

In a situation where the municipality's own school system is perceived as complicated and difficult to grasp, a standardised allocation may be seen as a manageable and efficient way to distribute municipal resources. The risks and difficulties of dismantling a traditional allocation system that has proved workable are underlined in the interviews with the members of leadership. One advantage of a traditional standardised allocation could also be that it suppresses the conflicts the interviews show to exist between different committees and between mandatory and self-initiated municipal operations.

### Continued standardised allocation to head teachers

As shown by the interviews, the responsibility to manage national goal attainment within the allocated standardised framework is placed on the municipal education committee. The subsequent allocation from the committee to the respective heads is described as money going from sacks to bags. Despite major disparities in goal attainment between the municipality's schools, the size of these bags does not change significantly from year to year. This indicates that the standardised allocation continues further down in the organisation, as also found in more detailed studies of municipal resource management.<sup>77</sup> The National Agency for Education's survey of 2009 shows that in most municipalities, 92 per cent, the budget allocation to schools is not affected by pupils' school performance.<sup>78</sup> When financial resources are allocated to the different schools in the municipality, it appears that socio-economic factors are not assigned sufficient weight despite a high correlation with the pupils' conditions for achieving good academic performance. According to research, a more

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76 National Agency for Education (1996c). *Hantering av skolans ekonomiska resurser: konsekvenser av ett nytt styrsystem i en förändrad ekonomi*. Stockholm pp. 13 and 29; National Agency for Education (2009) p. 48.

77 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 101; cf. ESO 2009:5 pp. 102 f.

78 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 44.

compensatory allocation of resources could contribute to greater performance equality.<sup>79</sup>

In concrete terms, this “bag financing” means that if head teachers invest resources to improve goal attainment in one area, resources must be taken from another area of school activity. One example is that increased needs in schools, such as the improvement of pupils’ results in national tests, have led to a gradual transfer of resources from out-of-school centres to schools, which has contributed to a reduction in staffing levels in out-of-school centres and their gradual increase in group size.<sup>80</sup> A shift of resources and tasks down to the level of heads might also result in an ineffective sub-optimisation of available resources. Desirable measures may be cancelled since they can only be implemented and become cost effective if there is a municipality-wide investment in schools.

It has also been noted that a standardised and equal allocation to municipal schools means that pupils with a major need for support are more likely to receive the support they need in schools where a small proportion of pupils requires support than in schools where a large proportion of pupils requires support.<sup>81</sup>

### Uncertainty about the importance of resources

Unchanged goal attainment levels lead the interviewees to talk about the importance of financial resources for schools’ achievement of the national knowledge requirements. Some representatives of the municipal leadership express surprise that the committee is not able to produce a better school system and achieve better goal attainment with the funds already allocated. The lower municipal level, the committee and the Head of Department, regards the allocated funds as sufficient to maintain the current standards, but not to improve goal attainment. According to the Heads of Department and the Committee Chairs, in order to improve goal attainment by reducing the group sizes in out-of-school centres, improving the pupil-teacher ratio, recruiting teachers with teaching qualifications and providing professional development to give teachers training in the subjects they teach, the municipal leadership needs to provide additional financial resources.

When the interviewed politicians express uncertainty about the importance of financial resources for the system, they frequently say that “resources have no importance”. This perception is often based on sources such as one of the National Agency for Education’s reports from the 1990s, which was hotly

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79 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 91.

80 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 48.

81 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 101.

debated in the media in connection with municipal cost cutting requirements on schools. That report found that research shows that “expenditure parameters are not related to pupils’ performance”.<sup>82</sup> However, these research findings proved to be built on weak foundations. In 2002, a report from the National Agency for Education found that it was now imperative to “reject the almost unanimous opinion among education economists in the early 1990s on the absence of links between resources and results.”<sup>83</sup> However, the significance of resources for results is dependent on how they are managed.

### Demand for targeted grants from central government

According to the interviews, there is a difference in views on the resource needs of the school sector between the higher and lower municipal levels. While, as previously shown, the municipal leadership focuses more on the inefficiency of the sector, the committee level reports that it regards the sector as doing all it can with the funds allocated. This means that while the lower level expresses a need for more funds, the perception at the higher level is that it is possible to improve quality in the school sector within the allocated budget framework. The committee’s difficulty regarding feedback to and response from the municipal leadership leads to a situation that can be described as deadlocked. This may explain why only marginal measures are taken in the municipality’s schools within areas that require significant changes in order to achieve set national goals.<sup>84</sup>

In this situation, extra targeted grants from central government are seen by both parties as a solution to the deadlock. Although such special and temporary grants are appreciated and lead to activity in the areas in question, the investment is marginal in the context of the entire school system. Moreover, if the municipal leadership sees that central government, through special support initiatives, is taking over its role of creating conditions to improve goal attainment, this may have a passivising effect on its own work to improve its schools.

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82 National Agency for Education (1996c). *Skolan och de ekonomiska resurserna: en samlingsrapport om nationellt och lokalt beslutsunderlag i ett nytt styrsystem*. Stockholm p. 60.

83 National Agency for Education (2002). *Ekonomiska resursers betydelse för pedagogiska resultat: en kunskapsöversikt*. Stockholm p. 59.

84 National Agency for Education (2009) p. 101.

## Conclusions

This qualitative study has attempted to capture the perspectives of responsible authorities and specific problems at the intersection between national governance and municipal self-government.

The municipality's authority responsibility has been highlighted from three national governance perspectives: legal, financial and normative. The study has shown examples of how the state's legally regulated reinforcement of the municipality's authority responsibility for schools is not perceived and interpreted in accordance with the role stated in the Education Act. The state's delegation to municipalities of the responsibility to provide conditions and assess the need for financial resources to enable schools to achieve the national goals cannot always be said to have been managed in an appropriate or equitable manner. The governance most strongly emphasised by central government, governance through a normative setting of goals for the school system and the issuing of quality guidelines, has been weakened by being adapted to the municipalities' own norms for the school sector. Central government's various forms of performance monitoring, information and calls for municipalities to strengthen the normative governance in policy documents have not led to lasting improvements in the form of improved quality in the sector or improved goal attainment.

Central government instructions to improve goal attainment in the school system have not had sufficient impact. This can be seen, for example, in the context of the way municipalities interpret and manage their authority responsibility for schools. The patterns and problem scenarios presented in this study can be summarised in the following conclusions:

3. The eight municipalities demonstrate a lack of clarity on how to manage the responsible authority role. It is often delegated to a committee or department. However, it is unclear how this delegated responsibility is governed and followed up by the municipal leadership and how feedback takes place. For this reason, it is common for the subordinate level to find it difficult to highlight shortcomings and problems relating to the national assignment.
4. There are indications that the municipal leadership does not govern the school system on the basis of an integrated assignment from the state. The central government objectives for schools are sometimes seen as long-term visions, not as objectives to be fulfilled. Some central government requirements are not prioritised in the municipal implementation, with the result that national goals are ignored and nationally set objective levels lowered. In addition, resources are allocated in a standardised manner that is not

based on an analysis of local conditions and needs with a view to achieving the national goals.

Overall, the study has shown how municipalities' interpretation of their authority responsibility can prevent them from acting to increase equity and significantly improve goal attainment in schools. The lack of clarity regarding the division of responsibility, governance and follow-up is extensive. This creates difficulties in the interaction between the education department, the education committee and the municipal leadership. Governance tends to be more one-sided in favour of certain key ratios and comparisons. This may help to explain the persistent shortcomings in such basic prerequisites for school quality as the head teacher's leadership skills, teacher qualifications, teaching quality and resource allocation based on different schools' needs.

The following describes in more detail the patterns and problem scenarios addressed in the study.

### 1. No clarification of how to manage the authority responsibility

The interviews demonstrate that there are differing opinions within the municipality as to who has the responsible authority role and also how to manage the authority responsibility. This lack of consensus may be an indication that what the responsible authority role means in practice is neglected in municipal political activities. The focus is more on the committee's operational responsibilities than on the municipal leadership's ultimate exercise of responsibility for quality and goal attainment in schools.

The Education Act and the Local Government Act describe the municipal assembly as recipient of the state's responsible authority assignment. It is thus the municipal leadership – the municipal assembly and its drafting body, the municipal executive committee – that is *responsible* for the school system's fulfilment of the national goals and requirements levels. The municipal assembly appoints a committee to operationally discharge central government's assignments for the school system. In this way, the education committee is accountable for the school system to the municipal assembly, which as responsible authority is in turn accountable to the central government.

### 2. Responsibility is separated from power

The interviews consistently demonstrate a separation of powers and responsibility in the municipality's role as responsible authority. The power to grant authority over finances and the overall organisation lies with the higher political leadership, while responsibility for quality and goal attainment is placed further down in the organisation. This means that it is the committee level and

the department level that take the ultimate, and not only operational, authority responsibility for quality and goal attainment in the municipality's schools. In practice, this responsibility may be shifted further down to head teachers and teachers.

Feedback is a fundamental component of a decentralised organisation. Systematic feedback that provides the municipal leadership with a clear picture of the sector's conditions for achieving the national goals is not brought up by the municipal representatives interviewed in the study. Instead, Committee Chairs report the difficulty they have in involving the political leadership of the municipality in matters concerning prerequisites for improving the school system.

### 3. National goals are ignored and national requirement levels lowered

The interviews show that there is a problem in that the politicians see the national goals for schools more as ambitious visions than as a basis for the governance of their school system. The goals of the curriculum are intended to be a starting point for the responsible authorities, partly to create an appropriate school system and partly to assess the results achieved. If the results show that the goals are not being achieved, it is the job of the responsible authority to take measures to improve quality in schools, for example by reallocating resources and restructuring the organisation. Through a joint national goal document, central government wishes to guarantee the equitability and quality of Swedish schools.

The disparities that exist among Sweden's municipalities can be explained by the fact that, instead of the national policy documents, each municipality uses its own set of goals as the basis for its governance of schools. Certain readily quantifiable national goals are selected and, together with municipal goals, these become the goals for schools in the municipality. It is the goals formulated by the municipal leadership that govern the focus of how the education committee is to carry out its role. It is also these goals which are followed up in the municipal evaluation process.

The municipality's accountability to central government for creating conditions to enable the achievement of the national goals is perceived vaguely. In practice, central government requirements are subordinate to municipal priorities. That the school system can continue in the same way year after year despite inadequate goal attainment may be a factor in the situation not being perceived as alarming, but rather as something normal and therefore acceptable in practice.

#### 4. Resource allocation is standardised

The study has shown that the allocation of resources from the municipal assembly to the committees in the municipalities interviewed occurs in a routine, standardised manner according to each municipality's traditional priorities. This may mean that the allocation of resources to the school system is not based on an analysis of local conditions and needs in relation to national goal documents. Such a standardised allocation downwards in the organisation may counteract the equivalence of conditions among the municipality's schools.

A situation where resource allocation is locked by being standardised and responsibility for schools is shifted to a committee may mean that the highest political offices do not see themselves as part of the problem of poor goal attainment. As a consequence, the solution is in practice placed outside municipal politics, for head teachers and teachers to manage within the allocated budget framework, and an expectation of further central government grants.

## Closing remarks

This study has focused on the school system. It began by stating that the obligations and responsibilities of municipalities are extensive. National governance in the form of goals, laws and ordinances is substantial in more areas than just school system. The study has not captured this full range of central government requirements – are the state’s requirements on municipalities reasonable, coordinated, supported by stakeholders? The study does not address the question of whether the same problem scenarios are found in other operational areas within the municipality, whether municipal governance is the same regardless of sector or whether schools have a unique position among municipal operations. There are indications in the interviews that it is this last point that is the case – that schools are unique among municipal operations. The school sector is perceived as complicated and there is unawareness that the assignment from the state is addressed to both the responsible authorities and the professionals working in the sector. There is thus a range of issues, dilemmas and problems that deserve further study, reflection and discussion, not only within the municipalities but also between the state and the municipalities. Despite the limitations of this study, the National Agency for Education hopes that the perceptions and fundamental dilemmas presented in this report will provide a basis for a greater understanding of specific fundamental problems at the intersection between national governance and municipal self-government.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Method

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the responsibility and influence of the municipality as responsible authority for schools on goal attainment in schools. The study is limited to the most common form of municipal responsible authority, that is, municipalities with committee organisations. It is a qualitative study that uses examples from different municipalities to illustrate the thoughts and actions of municipal leaders. Central to the study is their perception of the municipality's authority responsibility and how they receive and manage the central government instructions.

Two test interviews showed that group interviews were less appropriate for this study. The interviewees appeared to adapt their responses to other interviewees. To obtain as good a picture as possible of each individual's thoughts and perceptions, individual interviews were deemed the best method. A number of key actors in each municipality were interviewed, both people in political office and administrative staff. Thus, in each municipality, interviews were conducted with the Municipal Commissioner (Chair of the Executive Committee), the Chair of the Municipal Assembly, the Chair of the committee with responsibility for schools, the Municipal Chief Executive and the Head of the Education Department. In two municipalities, there was, in addition to an ordinary Municipal Commissioner, an employed politician with specific responsibility for school matters.

The selection of municipalities was made in order to yield as much breadth and variation as possible, while keeping the number of interviews manageable. When selecting municipalities, the following factors were taken into account: municipal population, geographical location, political governance, proportion of pupils attaining the goals for all subjects in year 9, size of children's groups in out-of-school centres and proportion of qualified teachers. The municipalities are not mentioned by name in this report, but the table below gives a brief description of the municipalities studied.

Municipality	Approximate population	Geographical location	Political governance	Size of children's groups in out-of-school centres relative to the national average	Proportion of qualified teachers relative to the national average	Proportion of pupils who attain the goals in all subjects in year 9 relative to the national average	Number of interviews
1	70 000	Norrland	S	Above	Below	Above	6
2	10 000	Svealand	A	Above	Below	Above	5
3	70 000	Svealand	B	Above	Above	Below	6
4	20 000	Götaland	B	Above	Above	Below	5
5	50 000	Götaland	B	Below	Below	Below	5
6	< 10 000	Svealand	S	Below	Below	Above	5
7	>100 000	Götaland	B	Below	Above	Below	5
8	15 000	Svealand	A	Below	Above	Above	5

Political governance: S= Left of center majority, B= Right of center majority, A= other, e.g. Right of center parties in cooperation with the Green Party or other solutions across traditional party blocks.

The study is thus based on interviews conducted in eight municipalities, a total of 42 interviews. The interviews were conducted in late 2009. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Due to illness, four interviews were conducted afterwards by telephone, the last of which was completed in January 2010. Notes were taken at the time of the interviews. The interviews were also recorded, but have not been transcribed. Quotations from the interviews are used in the study to illustrate and exemplify points made. The intention of the interviews was to highlight different patterns and problem scenarios that are relevant in relation to the purpose of the study.

## Appendix 2. The political organisation of municipalities

To facilitate understanding of the results and the considerations presented in this study, a brief summary of the political organisation of municipalities is given below.

Common to all 290 municipalities in Sweden is that they are governed by a municipal assembly with a municipal executive committee.<sup>85</sup> Most municipalities have a number of specialist committees with decision-making power in demarcated areas of operation. Around thirty municipalities have ‘alternative organisations’, where the specialist committees have been replaced by drafting bodies to the municipal assembly. Another organisational model, especially in larger cities, is that a city district committee is responsible for all operations, including schools, in the city district. There is also an organisational model where small municipalities have certain joint committees across municipal boundaries.

The eight municipalities that are part of this study have a municipal assembly, with associated municipal executive committee, as the highest political body.<sup>86</sup>

The *municipal assembly* is the highest representative body for the residents of the municipality and determines goals and guidelines for municipal operations.<sup>87</sup> The municipal assembly is responsible for municipal operations being in accordance with laws and ordinances and has the ultimate decision-making power in the municipality. According to the Local Government Act, the municipal assembly may not delegate to committees matters concerning goals and guidelines for municipal operations or the municipal budget.<sup>88</sup> Through central government appropriations and its own right of taxation, it is the municipal assembly that has the power to determine the scale and priority of different municipal operations and to supply the financial resources deemed necessary to achieve set goals.

The *municipal executive committee* is the municipal assembly’s drafting body to direct and coordinate municipal operations. It has a special status because it is the only mandatory committee regulated by the Local Government Act. It drafts matters to be decided in the assembly, is in charge of financial management and implements assembly decisions. One task is to exercise supervi-

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85 Chapter 3, Sections 1–2 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

86 Other ways of organising the political leadership of a municipality in the form of city district committees, or replacing the committees with drafting bodies directly to the municipal assembly, are outside the scope of this study

87 Pettersson, Olof (2006) p. 146.

88 Chapter 3, Section 9 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

sion over other committees. In some municipalities, depending for example on the size of the municipality, matters to the municipal executive committee may be drafted in a special executive sub-committee.

A *central municipal administration*, a municipal office, is at the disposal of the municipal executive committee. The office is led by the municipality's highest official, a Municipal Chief Executive. The role is to draft matters and to execute and follow up decisions.

All the visited municipalities have a chief administrative officer, with a variety of Swedish titles corresponding to Municipal Chief Executive. The Municipal Chief Executive reports to the municipal executive committee and is often, but not in all cases, manager of the Heads of Department, the Head of Finance, the Head of Human Resources and other managers within the municipality's central administration.

The purpose of the *committee organisation* is to govern different parts of municipal operations on behalf of the municipal assembly. The most common form is committees with their own decision-making power to discharge the municipality's tasks within a demarcated area of operation. The areas may either constitute parts of a larger area, such as a compulsory school committee, or include multiple areas of operation, such as an education and recreation committee. The committees are to apply assembly decisions and the laws and ordinances governing their operations.<sup>89</sup>

An *administrative organisation*, an Education Department or the equivalent, is at the disposal of the specialist committee. Its director, the Head of Department, is responsible for the drafting of issues for discussion and decision by the committee, execution and follow up of decisions and management of the school sector operations. Under the Head of Department level are officials that exercise central government authority. These are head teachers, whose assignment is formulated in the Education Act and the curricula, and teachers, who receive their assignments from the curricula and syllabuses.

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89 Chapter 6, Section 7 of the Local Government Act (1991:900).

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