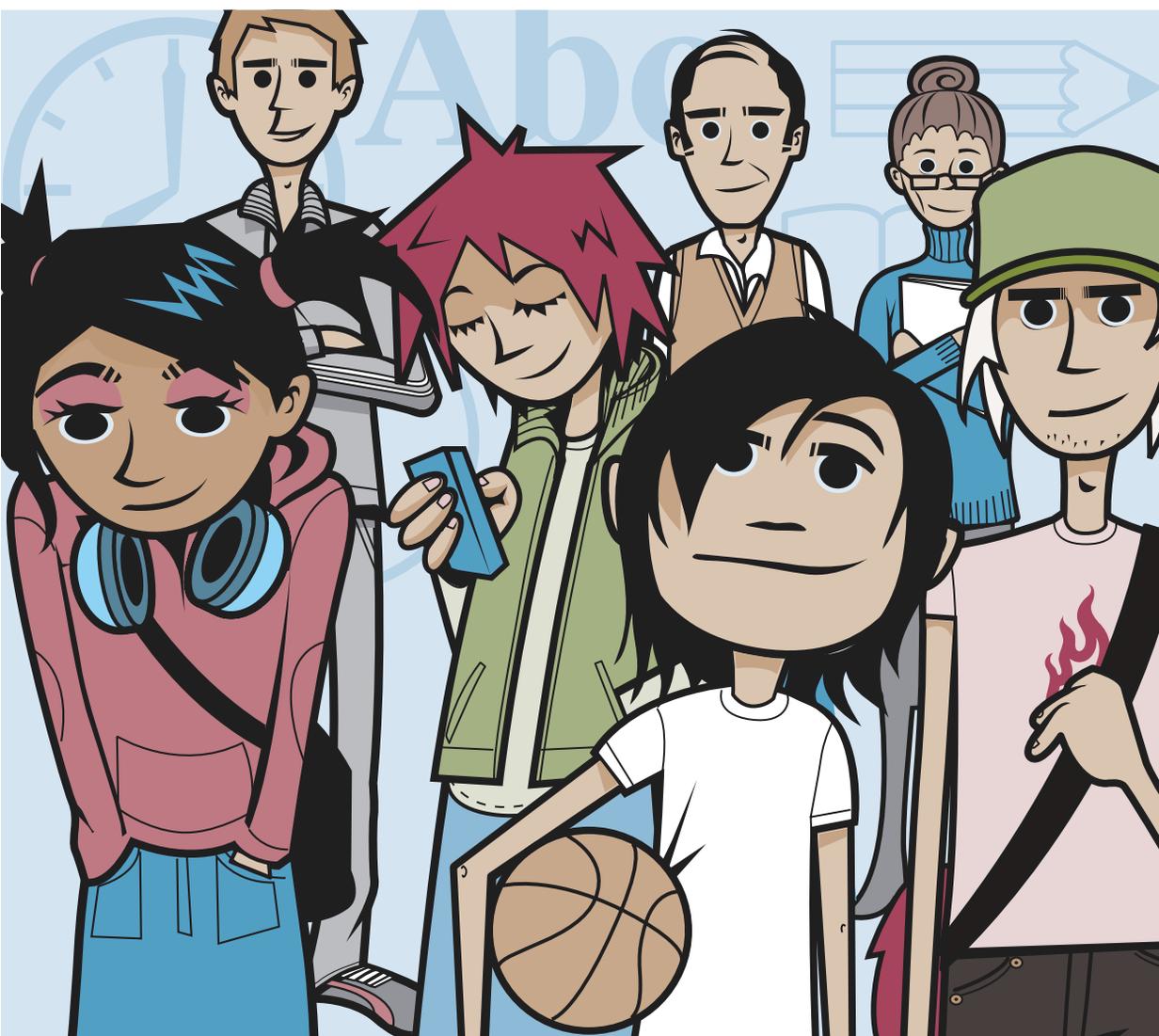


Attitudes to school 2003

The attitudes of students, teachers, parents of school-age children and the general public to school over a decade.



Attitudes to school

Order adress:
Fritzes kundservice
SE-106 47 Stockholm, Sweden

Phone: +46 8 690 95 76
Fax: +46 8 690 95 50
E-mail: skolverket@fritzes.se
www.skolverket.se

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Foreword

A decade has passed since the Swedish National Agency for Education decided to carry out regular studies of the attitudes among students in grades 7 to 9 and upper secondary schools, teachers, parents of school-age children and the general public. It has been a time of many changes in schools. Local authorities have acquired responsibility for schools and we have acquired a new curriculum, while reformed upper secondary schools, a new grading system and the right to choose schools have been introduced.

The overall aim of the attitude study is to supplement the Agency's national follow-up and assessment of Swedish primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools and the results of these with information on the views, impressions and attitudes of different groups to school. Through the study we are able to trace how perceptions of school have changed over time. The study is carried out every third year –the first time was in 1993. Like other follow-up and assessment schemes, these studies should provide a basis for more in-depth discussions about schools and hence contribute to their development as well as signalling areas for more detailed analyses and specific assessments. Areas the study highlights include bullying, stress, confidence in schools, the school in social debate and democracy. New features of *Attitudes to school 2003* are that the results of the study are presented question by question on the Swedish National Agency for Education's website, that we have expanded the sample of students with foreign background and parents born abroad, and that students have interpreted the results of the study in two focus groups and given their views on the draft. Another new feature is that the questionnaire for students has been adapted so that younger students (aged 10–12) are also able to complete it. The results for the younger students will be published in a separate report later in 2004.

The project team that worked on the study consists of Erika Borgny, Camilla Thinsz Fjellström and Annika Jonsson, all from the Swedish National Agency for Education's Department for research. In addition, Mona Bergman, Staffan Engström, Charlotte Samuelsson and Johanna Jansson, all from the Swedish National Agency for Education, have assisted in the work on the report. The chapter *Is school successful?* was written by Nihad Bunar and Lisa Kings, both from Södertörn University College. The chapter *The knowledge assignment of school* was written by Ingrid Carlgren and Magnus Hultén, both from the Stockholm Institute of Education.

Finally we would like to thank the students, parents, teachers and members of the public who took part in the study. In particular, we would like to thank the students who discussed the results of this year's study with us in two focus groups and gave us their views on this report.

Stockholm 2004

Staffan Lundb
Head of Department

Erika Borgny
Project manager

Summary

For a decade now, the Swedish National Agency for Education has been conducting regular studies of the attitudes of students in grades 7 to 9 and upper secondary schools, of primary and secondary school teachers, of parents of school-age children and of the general public. This year's study is the fourth conducted since the start of the programme in 1993, and some 8,000 individuals have taken part in the study by participating in mail-in or telephone interviews. What follows is a summary of the most significant results of the "Attitudes towards School 2003" study. A summary of each section is also provided at the end of each section.

This year's study has been modified in several regards. The inclusion of students with a foreign background and parents born abroad has increased, which has generated data that can allow for comparisons to be made among these groups. It is also possible this year to study the answers to each individual question in tables published on the National Agency for Education web site. Another new feature is that the questionnaire for students has been adapted so that younger students (aged 10–12) are also able to complete it. The results of the study of these younger students will be published in a separate report later in 2004.

The overall aim of the attitude study is to supplement the Agency's national follow-up study and assessment of the Swedish primary and secondary schools and the results of these with information on the views, impressions and attitudes of different groups regarding schools. The study is intended to provide a basis for more in-depth discussion of schools, as well as signalling areas for more detailed analysis. The results are presented from a number of different perspectives, the most important involving the possibility of making comparisons over time and of the attitudes of different groups to the various issues.

To further ensure that the students' voices are heard and to gain a greater understanding of what lies behind the results of the study, we have visited schools and discussed the results with the students. These discussions are collected in the appendix. We have also asked upper secondary school students to read our manuscript and provide their views on it.

Confidence in schools

The more remote school officials and bodies are from the respondent's everyday life, the less confidence the respondent has in them. About half the parents included in the study have a high degree of confidence in teachers. A third of the parents have a high degree of confidence in the rectors, while one in six have the same confidence in the National Agency for Education, and one in ten have this confidence in school policy-makers. It is imperative that

the general public has confidence in institutions charged with taking authoritative decisions, since the very legitimacy of society is at issue. It is therefore a serious matter that confidence in the governing authorities, despite having increased between 2000 and 2003 is still low, these authorities being school policy-makers at the national and municipal levels and the National Agency for Education, which is the body responsible for assessment. Parents born in foreign countries have a higher degree of confidence in the governing authorities than do parents born in Sweden.

Influence

The students' perception of their opportunities to exert influence has remained largely unchanged since 1997. The changes that can be detected over the course of the decade took place between 1993 and 1997. Then, the share of students who felt that they had influence – especially on teaching – increased. Most students wish to exert influence on their schools. Above all, they wish to have a say in their choice of school and ways of working, and it is also in these areas where the distance between wanting to influence and actually being able to do so is the shortest. Homework and examinations and the subjects taught in school are two areas in which many students express a desire to have influence, and in which the distance between wanting to influence and being able to is great. Seven in ten students wish to influence, and four in ten feel they are able to influence what they learn in school. Girls show a greater desire to exert influence than boys do in most areas. As regards the students' sense of how much influence they can wield, there are differences between the different types of school. For example, upper secondary school students feel that they can influence homework and examinations more than primary and lower secondary school students feel they can influence these same areas.

The majority of the teachers feel that they have considerable influence over their teaching, including what the students can learn, the way in which they work, and textbooks and other teaching aids. Their views on the amount of influence they wield has remained largely unchanged throughout the decade. Teachers with less teaching experience feel to a greater extent than teachers with more experience that students should have greater influence than they do, and this applies to all areas they were asked about. In 2003, considerably fewer teachers feel that students can cope with the responsibility required for exerting more influence at school, compared with 1997.

Parents want, above all, to be able to influence their own children's opportunities to receive special support. Class size, the specific school that the child is to attend, and the norms and rules that apply in school are other areas that a majority of parents wish to influence. Parents do not feel they are able to

exert influence to as great an extent as they would like. Choice of school is the area in which parents feel they have most say. The parents who participated in the 2003 study give the same impression of their possibilities for influencing schools as the parents who answered the questionnaire ten years ago.

Teachers ward off the idea of taking greater responsibility for the students' personal and social growth.

As previously, there is no agreement between teachers and parents on the question of whether schools should take greater responsibility for the students' personal and social growth. Only a small portion of the teachers feel that schools should take greater responsibility in this area, whereas a considerable share of the parents feel they should. Parents born in a foreign country feel to a considerably greater extent that schools should take greater responsibility, compared to parents born in Sweden. As in previous years, the students do not feel there is a need for more adults in schools, an issue on which primary and lower secondary school teachers and parents, above all, take the opposite view.

The share of parents who choose their children's school has doubled since 1993

Since 1993, the share of parents who have chosen to send their children to a school other than the state school located closest to their home has increased from 9 to 19 per cent. This increase primarily involves choosing an independent school. Of those parents who have chosen a school other than the state school located closest to their home, half choose other state schools and half choose independent schools. Three quarters of the parents take a positive view of independent schools, but the share of parents who feel it is a good thing that parents can choose independent schools with a religious focus has fallen from 42 to 34 per cent. The general public is also critical of independent schools with a religious focus; only 30 per cent feel that this is a good idea.

Fewer than half the students indicate that they are provided with study and career guidance

Fewer than half the students indicate that they have been provided with study and career guidance. It is possible that this reflects the lack of study and career counsellors placed in schools. There is one study counsellor per 300 students. Only half the study and career counsellors have received relevant training in their profession.

More parents are satisfied with the resources available to schools, although there is still dissatisfaction with student welfare

Today, as many or more parents feel that the resources available in different areas of the school system are sufficient, compared to three years ago. The only area in which parents are less satisfied with the resources available today than three years ago is student welfare. The study shows that students are also dissatisfied about there being too few student welfare personnel in schools.

The timetable reduces teacher work considerably

In 1993, three out of four teachers felt that the class timetable had a considerable impact on their work at school. Today, it is every other teacher. At the same time, the importance of local working plans, grading criteria and national examinations has increased.

Teachers and students feel that options for special support have improved

The students are the ones who are most satisfied with the possibility of receiving special support at their own school, and teachers and students alike feel that schools have become better at providing such support. The results of the study show that three in four students, four in ten teachers, and four in ten parents feel that the possibilities for students to receive special support at their own school are very or quite good. Eight in ten teachers feel that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to discover when students are in need of special support, while five in ten feel that they have the skills required to provide this support. Teachers who have been teaching for a longer period of time feel that they are better at both discovering the need for special support and providing it.

The closer people's contact with schools, the more satisfied they are with how well schools are succeeding

Students take a more positive view to schools than do the general public and parents. Most students maintain that schools have succeeded in contributing to their individual development on different levels, a view that is shared to a certain extent by the teachers. Parents and the general public, however, are more sceptical about whether schools have succeeded in this regard. Those who are the most negative about whether schools have succeeded in stimulating the students' general and individual development are those most distant from schools.

Students feel that sport is most fun, but that English, Swedish and maths are the most important

The students feel that sport is the most fun subject, but not the most important. The most important subjects are English, Swedish and maths. Other languages and religion are deemed the least important by students, parents and the general public. The share of students who feel that other languages are important has fallen from 44 per cent in 1997 to 24 per cent in 2003, while the share of students who feel that religion is important has increased from 22 to 31 per cent during the same period. The students do not feel that the sciences are fun or important. In 2003, 34 per cent of the students feel that acquiring knowledge and skills in science is important, which represents a decrease from 1997, when this share was 44 per cent.

The teacher-student relationship has developed positively

The relationship between teachers and students developed positively over the past decade.

Students and teachers alike feel to a greater extent that there is a positive atmosphere and team spirit at school. The share of students who feel calm and secure has increased, but students with a foreign background feel less secure in school than students with a Swedish background. The students are happier with their teachers, and the share of those who feel it is easy to approach their teachers with school-related problems has increased from 50 to 78 per cent during the decade. The students also feel to a greater extent that they can refuse to go along with things they think are wrong without having to suffer negative consequences. In 1993, 61 per cent of the students felt they could do this, compared to 84 per cent in 2003.

Students are more involved at school

On questions such as the extent to which the students feel that their teachers do a good job teaching, the extent to which the teachers manage to involve the students and generate interest, whether the teachers believe in the students and their capacity for learning, and the extent to which the teachers pay attention to the students' experience and views, the share of students who feel that all or most teachers do this has increased by about 10 percentage points. Today, 76 per cent of the students say that they are very involved or quite involved in their schoolwork, compared to 60 per cent a decade ago. In addition, more students feel a desire to learn and that going to school is meaningful, and the share of students who would rather work than go to upper secondary school has fallen somewhat.

Bullying appears to have declined somewhat

Many students still feel bullied or harassed by other students in school, although the share of these students has decreased from 4 per cent in 2000 to 3 per cent in 2003. More students (5 per cent) feel they are bullied or harassed by their teachers. Students, teachers and parents now agree to a greater extent that bullying is a serious problem at school, while they are also in greater agreement that schools make a considerable effort to stop bullying. Nearly all teachers (93 per cent) report that there is a program to prevent bullying and other offensive behaviour at their school, but a quarter of the teachers feel they do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to play an active role in preventing it.

Foul language, violence and racism

One in four students and one in five teachers feel there is racism at school. More than one in five students, teachers and parents report that there is violence at school. One in five teachers report that they have been subjected to violence, threats or harassment at their workplace in the past five years – by students, parents or school staff. Approximately seven in ten students, four in ten teachers and four in ten parents feel that foul language and profanity are common in schools. The picture painted by teachers and students alike is that foul language, racism and violence are more common in primary and lower secondary schools than in upper secondary schools.

Stress affecting younger students

For students and teachers alike, stress is a major problem at school. The increase in the experience of stress in the 2000 assessment persists this year. Stress experienced by students is affecting younger students, and the differences between boys and girls have been magnified. In the 1997 study, one in five primary and lower secondary school student reported that they always or usually felt stressed in school. Today, the figure is one in three. In 2003, every other girl and one in five boys report that they experience stress in school. We also see a gender difference among teachers; five in ten women and four in ten men report that they always or usually feel stressed in school.

Schools have become better at providing information

Today, parents report to a greater extent that they are satisfied with the information that schools provide in several areas, compared to the first attitude study in 1993. They feel, for example, that schools have become considerably better at providing information on norms and rules. Parents of children in primary and lower secondary school feel as a whole that the information schools provide about their own children is better than the more general

information provided by schools. There is considerable agreement between the parents' views on parent-teacher conferences and their views on the information schools provide concerning their children's performance in different subjects and how they fit in socially. This suggests that parent-teacher conferences work well as a channel of information. The students are more satisfied than the parents are, and parents of younger children are more satisfied than parents of older children. Parents born in a country other than Sweden feel to a lesser extent that the information they receive about their own children's performance in different subjects is adequate.

A quarter of the teachers do their grading alone

The fact that 27 per cent of the teachers do not work with another teacher to assign marks threatens the fairness of grading. Despite this, teachers and students alike feel that the teachers have become better at assigning marks. This increase might be due to the fact that teachers and students have now learned and are accustomed to the new grading system. While the students as a whole are more satisfied than previously, one in ten students still feel that about half the teachers assign marks fairly, and one in ten students feel that only a few or none of their teachers grade fairly.

Concluding remarks

For ten years the National Agency for Education has carried out regular attitude studies among students, teachers, parents of school-aged children and the general public. Via different policy decisions, schools have been influenced in many ways during this period. The municipalities have become the responsible authority for schools, major cost-cutting has been achieved in schools, a new curriculum has been presented, a reformed upper secondary school has taken shape, the grading system has been altered, and the option of choosing schools has been introduced.

Attitude studies were conducted in 1993, 1997, 2000 and 2003. As a whole, this year's study indicates a positive development in schools, but that there are still problems that require additional work. Confidence in schools increased among all of the surveyed groups between 2000 and 2003. However, there is still a lot of catching up to do before teachers will have the same confidence in the Agency and school policy-makers that they had in 1993.

A number of the results suggest that the relationship between teachers and students has developed positively over the past decade, and that the students are happier with their teachers, find it easier to approach them with problems in school, and are not afraid to refuse to go along with things they feel are wrong. Students are also more satisfied with the teaching they receive, and feel that opportunities for special support have improved. More students say

that they are involved in their schoolwork, and more of them feel that going to school is meaningful.

Schools have not been as successful at giving the students the influence they would like; there is a greater discrepancy between what the students would like to influence and what they can influence. The opportunities for students to influence schools have not improved since 1997.

Being subjected to stress for long periods is detrimental to health, which is why it is a serious matter that the increase in stress detected between 1997 and 2000 now seems to have been maintained and to be extending to the lower grades. The previous significant gender difference has also increased. Today, every other girl and one in five boys report that they always or usually feel under stress in school.

The increased inclusion of parents born in a foreign country and students with a foreign background has provided us with new knowledge about the similarities and differences among these groups. The study indicates that the similarities are more numerous than the differences, especially among the students, whose attitudes differ in only a few areas having to do with the social environment and views concerning the subjects taught in school. Students with a foreign background experience more fear and worries in school and feel less secure than students with a Swedish background. Parents born in foreign countries also feel less secure when their children are at school, compared to parents born in Sweden. Students with a foreign background feel to a greater extent than students with a Swedish background that English, religion and other foreign languages are fun subjects. Parents born in a foreign country feel to a greater extent than parents born in Sweden that Swedish schools succeed in providing equal education, improving the students' self-confidence, and giving special support to students with difficulties. They also express greater confidence in schools and feel to a considerably greater degree that schools should take more responsibility for the personal and social development of the students, compared to parents born in Sweden. Parents born in a foreign country desire to a greater extent to influence schools and they also feel to a greater extent that they can exert such influence.

A decade has passed since the Swedish National Agency for Education decided to carry out regular studies of the attitudes among students, teachers, parents of school-age children and the general public. It has been a time of many changes in schools. Local authorities have acquired responsibility for schools and we have acquired a new curriculum, while reformed upper secondary schools, a new grading system and the right to choose schools have been introduced.

The overall aim of the attitude study is to supplement the Swedish National Agency for Education's national follow-up and assessment of Swedish primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools and the results of these with information on the views, impressions and attitudes of different groups to school.