



Proposals to improve school performances in Sweden

ESPN Flash Report 2017/66

JOHAN FRITZELL – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

JULY 2017

Description

A governmental School Commission proposes reforms to change the long-term trends of declining averages and increasing inequalities in learning outcomes. One key aspect caused heated political debate and another suggestion has already led to action by the Government.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in member and non-member nations, of 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance in mathematics, science, and reading. It has revealed that the performance of students in Sweden has declined substantially over a longer period (OECD 2015). Moreover, it has been shown that inequalities in the distribution of abilities have increased substantially, with family background becoming more important. This negative development has coincided with deregulation of the school system, which includes a voucher system allowing for choice of school, some of which are run by private-for-profit providers of publicly funded basic education.

The negative trends have not only raised great concern and heated political discussions within Sweden, but have also been frequently highlighted by supranational organisations such as the OECD and EU bodies. Accordingly, in the 2016 EU Council of Ministers' Recommendation to Sweden, it is noted that Sweden has the sharpest decline in educational performance of 15-year olds of any OECD country. It should be noted that average performance increased somewhat in the latest (2015) international comparisons (both PISA and TIMSS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science

Study]). The 2017 EU Recommendation which the European Commission submitted to the Council also acknowledges this halt in the decline of average performances, but highlights the large and growing performance gap reflecting the students' socioeconomic background (European Commission 2017).

In 2015, the Swedish Government started an official inquiry, the School Commission, with a mission to propose reforms and a national strategy for improving learning and equality within the basic school system. The final report from the Commission was delivered in April 2017. The Commission has suggested a vast number of recommendations. We have chosen to highlight the two proposals that have been most debated. The first regards a change in the selection rules for students in both public and private, so-called independent, schools. The second concerns increasing national responsibility for the financing of the school system and allocating resources to reflect the socioeconomic background of pupils.

The School Commission proposes that an active school choice be made by all students, but suggests fundamental changes in the selection processes. In state schools (run by the municipalities), the principle of selection due to proximity between the home and the school (*närhetsprincipen*) could be waived and instead replaced by random

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

selection, a lottery. In private schools, queuing time, most often used, should be abandoned, because it tends to lead to increasing school segregation, and could as well be replaced by random selection.

The other recommendation states that socioeconomic conditions should play a larger role in the distribution of resources to schools. Hence, it is suggested that the government should give earmarked support to the municipalities and the schools depending on the socioeconomic profile of the pupils within a school. Both suggestions aim at increasing equality and counteracting the increased segregation in the school system.

Outlook & commentary

The selection by lottery was immediately heavily criticised by the opposition, and after a few days the Minister for Education declared that this proposal is not on the table at all. But the process of implementing the proposed allocation of resources in line with socioeconomic differentials began immediately. The government recently stated that an additional 1.5 billion SEK (155 million EUR) is to be allocated to schools in the autumn budget and that this addition will be distributed according to the socioeconomic background of the pupils (Government Offices of Sweden).

It remains to be seen if the idea of random selection will, ultimately, be fully abandoned, as it appeared from the first day the report was published. A number of experts

and researchers have argued that such a selection process is a much better strategy to combat segregation than queuing time (Dagens Nyheter 2017-04-30); a view also expressed in a recent article by the director of OECD's educational directorate (Dagens Nyheter 2017-05-23). It seems that the immediate and strong negative reaction to the idea of random selection from the media and political leaders was a sort of gut reaction to the notion of a lottery. One immediate statement by a party leader within the opposition, Jan Björklund, best illustrates this: "children will be distributed in a huge tombola". This strong initial reaction appears to have undermined what could have been an efficient strategy to come to grips with the negative implications that the active school choice has had for average educational performance and for the distribution of abilities and learning outcomes among Swedish students.

The proposal to allocate increasing resources based on socioeconomic differences will most likely pass through parliament and be implemented, but the question here is rather about effects. It seems likely that such an allocation could have an equalising impact on learning results if it leads to smaller classes and more teachers; it seems less likely that it will have any notable effects on school socioeconomic segregation as such. Another problem might be the shortage of qualified teachers and the extent to which qualified and experienced teachers will move to schools in disadvantaged areas.

Further reading

Dagens Nyheter 2017-04-30. "Lottning bättre än närhet och kötid för att bryta segregering" ["Lottery better than proximity and queuing time to combat segregation"]. (Article written by 20 expert researchers in education)

Dagens Nyheter 2017-05-23. "Valfrihet och avregleringar har skadat svenska skolan" ["Freedom of choice and deregulations have harmed Swedish schools"]. (Article written by Andreas Schleicher, OECD)

European Commission (2017). "Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2017 NRP of Sweden", Brussels: European Commission.

Government Offices of Sweden (2017). "Miljardsatsning för en jämlik kunskapsskola" ["Investing billions for an equal, knowledge-producing school"]. Press release June 18, 2017.

<http://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2017/06/miljardsatsning-for-en-jamlik-kunskapsskola/>

OECD (2015). "Improving Schools in Sweden: an OECD perspective", Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD (2016). "Programme for international student assessment (PISA), Results from PISA 2015, Country note on Sweden", Paris: OECD.

Reports of the Government School Commission (SOU), 2017: 35. "Samling för skolan. National strategi för kunskap och likvärdighet. Slutbetänkande av skolkommission. Stockholm 2017" ["National strategy for improving learning outcomes and equality. Final report from the School Commission" (including an English summary)]

<http://www.regeringen.se/498092/contentassets/e94a1c61289142bfbcfdf54a44377507/samling-for-skolan---nationell-strategi-for-kunskap-och-likvardighet-sou-201735.pdf>.

Interview with Jan Björklund, party leader for the Liberals, in Radio Sweden, 2017-04-20: <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6677498>

Authors

[Johan Fritzell](#), Stockholm University and Karolinska Institutet