



Informal Meeting of OECD Ministers of Education

Oslo, 9 and 10 June 2009

Improving Equity in Education

Summary by the Chair, Norway's Minister of Education, Bård Vegar Solhjell

Ministers from OECD countries met for an informal discussion on improving equity in education. In an opening presentation, OECD Deputy Secretary-General Aart de Geus referred to the increasing importance of equity in education and the pressing need for better ways to address the issues. The Director for Education, Barbara Ischinger placed this meeting in the context of past and ongoing OECD work.

I emphasized the opportunity that lay before us to pursue reform so as to focus education policy more on equity and not just on quantity and efficiency.

The meeting first allowed us to reach a common understanding of what equity in education means. I think we agree that it means that everyone should have access to a minimum standard of education and every single child has the same opportunity to reach his or her full educational potential.

We also recognized that equity in education matters. Education is linked to higher incomes, better health, a longer life, successful parenting and civic participation. Hence fair and inclusive education is one of the most powerful levers available to make society more equitable and promote social mobility. But despite high political interest in improving equity and tackling school failure, many efforts remain to be done. This is a challenge we must face.

Rather than summarise these three sessions I would like to focus on:

1. What have we learned?
2. What could we do?
3. Where could the OECD help?

The first session was about *early intervention*.

What have we learned?

Early childhood education is critical in giving all children a strong start in life and it is important to start very early, especially where there are language differences and gaps. Effective and careful screening measures to identify these children are important.

Our common challenges here are to ensure that even the most disadvantaged children participate in early childhood education and we deliver high quality early education services, based around the needs of children and learning through play.

Early intervention is also important in schools to identify at an earlier age which children are starting to fall behind on the essential literacy and numeracy skills; and to develop better tools to help teachers and educators identify and support those children.

Many of us have groups at special risk, such as migrants and ethnic minorities. For children in these groups, in particular, but also more broadly, we need to involve parents and communities more effectively.

We also heard about the need to develop more appropriate teaching approaches for cultural and ethnic diversity.

What could Ministers do?

Teachers play a critical role and we need to look closely at our teacher training and retraining to equip teachers with effective strategies for addressing the needs of all children.

We need to look for ways to get greater parental involvement in schools and in their children's learning. This is clearly not easy to do, especially for reaching out to – and drawing in – those parents of children "at risk".

We also need to work closely with our colleagues responsible for other portfolios to make progress on equity.

Where could the OECD help?

We welcomed the work the OECD is planning on [*Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education*](#) and on [*Assessing Progress in Improving Equity in Education*](#).

The OECD will help us by continuing to share best practices and experiences on improving educational outcomes for migrant and minority students, as well as providing us with important data comparisons and analyses that help us better understand our situations and options for policy.

We also encourage the OECD to look more closely at how it can help us in tackling the challenge of training and professional development for teachers in how to identify when students are starting to fall behind and develop effective strategies to support these children, especially in the critical areas of literacy and numeracy.

The OECD could also help us to articulate the economic case for investing in high quality early childhood education and other early intervention measures, above all for the most disadvantaged children who most need these services.

The second session was about when school fails to interest.

What have we learned?

Most of us agree that dropout is a key problem of our education systems and are using a range of strategies to target its reduction.

Early prevention is a key investment. Not only in early childhood – also in primary and secondary: Investment in developing reading and writing skills early on contributes to reduce dropout, as children develop the skills needed to progress in education.

More quality vocational education and training is necessary, but also providing additional pathways linked to the world of work, providing apprenticeships or other combination of programmes that look to motivate and encourage students towards completion.

The possibilities of linking reception of benefits from different welfare programmes, to attendance and participation in school or completion of secondary or upper secondary education can also be considered.

As an example, providing different levels of curriculum depending on the need of the specific programmes rather than having generic knowledge levels implies a “Flexi-education”, which means that there are pathways across the systems and that there are no dead ends

What can Ministers do?

We need to continue pursuing complete graduation rates from our youngsters and we cannot fail to deliver.

We need to recognise that we have diverse children, with different interests. We need to provide individualised support in the classroom and consider more flexible curriculums that are attractive to different types of students and of needs.

We need to provide a range of alternatives in secondary and upper secondary for all, without making education systems too easy. This does not imply lowering the bar. We aim to make our education systems more inclusive, by developing mechanisms whereby we can ensure that everyone succeeds by providing tailored approaches.

What can the OECD do to help?

The OECD should continue investing in finding models and approaches to offer diverse and equivalent pathways in upper secondary education through its activity Assessing Progress in Educational Failure.

The OECD activity [Vocational Education and Training: Learning for Jobs](#) should enhance its focus on apprenticeships and on different approaches to combine work experience with academic knowledge.

The third session 3 was about what do we know and what do we do with our insight

What have we learned?

We underline the high social, moral and economic costs that result from under-utilisation of the skill potential of individuals because of inequities in education. We also agree that, despite significant resources invested in education, progress with reducing educational failure and moderating the impact which social background has on educational success and the life chances of individuals has generally been limited. The challenges of heterogeneity, equity and inclusion remain critical and continue to rise.

What can Ministers do?

Enhancing equity in educational opportunities depends not just on better measures of the socio-economic conditions under which students learn and schools work. But most importantly, it depends on better measures of individual student progress, linked to the individual socio-economic context of students and their home, such that equity-related interventions can be effectively targeted and useful feedback on student progress can be provided to parents, teachers, schools and education systems. Such data would need to be reported in terms of the value-added that teachers and schools bring to student learning outcomes and to be benchmarked against national goals and standards, in order to provide meaningful feedback to parents and schools.

We need to improve the diagnostic power of available data and their relevance and use by parents, teachers, schools and systems. More efforts are also needed to increase the capacity of teachers and schools to use evidence and data more effectively, with careful consideration given to what data should be made publicly available – and in what form – in order to feed a productive discussion on school improvement. We need to carefully balance aggregate information on school performance with continuously assessing student learning progress as part of the teaching and learning process in classrooms.

How can the OECD help?

We welcome the comparative data from the OECD, in particular PISA, as key instruments to identify and analyse equity-related issues in education systems. Emphasis should be given to choosing and establishing appropriate benchmarks on equity from these data and analysing them in a comparative perspective. It is also important to better measure the ability to learn, critical thinking abilities and other social competencies as well.

We are concerned about the absence of reliable comparative data on the completion of upper secondary education, given the significant impact the completion of upper secondary education has for the success of individuals. Such data would also need to be broken down by socio-economic dimensions in order to identify those student groups most at risk.

We ask the OECD to help countries in making a business case for where investments in education accrue the highest individual, social and economic outcomes and we welcome the OECD's efforts to quantify the economic costs of the achievement gap that results from inequalities in educational outcomes in its new study on the "*high costs of low performance*".

Let me conclude.

I am grateful to fellow Ministers for their openness in contributing to our exchanges which I know will be of great relevance to reform in my own country and will I hope be of equal value to them.

I look forward to the actions Ministers could take soon as reported above and I would like to ask the OECD to support us on a country level for our specific challenges.

I was also pleased to hear that in response to the financial and economic crisis the OECD will develop an online collaborative platform called "[OECD's education lighthouse for the way out of the crisis](#)". As we heard, it will be launched later this month at the OECD Ministerial Council meeting (24-25 June 2009). This lighthouse will certainly be a very precious instrument that could immensely help countries.

Finally, I would like to thank the organizers, the Ministry of Education of Norway and the OECD, and all of those who have contributed to the success of this event.

I wish you a pleasant stay in Oslo and Norway for those of you remaining here, and safe trip home for everyone.