

OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education

Sweden

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

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Executive Summary

In Sweden's highly decentralised education system, evaluation and assessment are crucial to ensure that professionals get the information and feedback they need to improve the quality of their work. Evaluation and assessment are also key tools for the central Government to monitor whether national goals for quality and equity in education are being achieved. The Swedish approach combines national standard-setting and central test development with a high degree of trust in school professionals to carry out evaluation and assessment. While key elements of evaluation and assessment are well established at student, teacher, school and system levels, challenges remain in aligning the different elements to ensure consistency and complementarity.

- **Increasing the reliability of national assessments and building teacher capacity.** As national assessments play a key role in Sweden's evaluation and assessment system, it is important that the results are reliable and nationally consistent. Currently, the national tests are scored locally by students' own teachers. A re-correction of national assessments showed that teacher grading was uneven. This raises concerns about fairness in grading and also reduces the adequacy of national test results as a measure of school and system performance. High quality training and professional development for effective assessment are essential to strengthen teachers' practices. External moderation can further help increase consistency and comparability of national test results. Options for doing this include having a second grader in addition to the students' own teachers, employing professionals for systematic external grading and/or moderation, or introducing a checking procedure by a competent authority or examination board.
- **Establishing teacher appraisal as an integral part of the evaluation and assessment framework.** Teachers benefit from a high degree of trust and extensive autonomy, but they have few opportunities for professional feedback. The teaching profession would benefit from a system of teacher appraisal for registration at key stages, associated with career opportunities for effective teachers. The appraisal system should be based on professional standards for teachers that provide a clear and concise statement or profile of what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. There also should be a stronger emphasis on teacher appraisal for improvement purposes that is fully internal to the school and linked to professional development opportunities. In this context, teacher appraisal should be closely connected to school self-evaluation, which should focus on monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.

- **Articulating school-self evaluation and external school evaluation.** The evaluation and quality assurance of individual schools is a well established aspect of the Swedish approach to evaluation and assessment. While a range of school evaluation practices are well developed, the different processes could be better articulated. External evaluation could be more clearly based on internal self-evaluation. The authorities should continue to provide professional development for internal quality management, make successful models available for schools, and stress the importance of quality reporting on teaching and learning progress. The evaluation competencies of staff at municipal level and networking among them should be supported so that they can fully play their role in quality assurance. If school self-evaluation is well developed, then the external evaluation can move to focus increasingly on risk-analysis, proportional inspection and stronger follow-up of problematic cases.
- **Strengthening education system monitoring and mobilising existing data.** The performance of the education system is monitored via a range of tools and the results are publicly available. But the system lacks a reliable measure of learning outcomes to monitor if national learning goals are being achieved. Different options should be explored to provide a more reliable system monitoring tool. This could include ensuring external monitoring of national assessments, introducing a sample monitoring survey or heightening the policy relevance of results from international assessments. In addition, Sweden should also encourage greater mobilisation of existing data and information. Simple options include improving the school level management of data, establishing a protocol for data sharing and consulting key stakeholders on how to best report existing information in a format that corresponds to municipal and school needs.
- **Developing a coherent framework for evaluation and assessment.** The well-detailed elements of evaluation and assessment currently do not link into a coherent framework. The development of a strategic plan or national framework for evaluation and assessment could help optimise alignment between the different components. It could provide an overview and reference for all actors working with evaluation and assessment in education, outline evaluation and assessment requirements at different levels, clarify responsibilities related to these requirements and map the range of tools that are available to optimise practices. It should be complemented by competency descriptions for those who carry evaluation responsibilities and be followed up by specific professional development opportunities.

Assessment and Conclusions

Education system context

Evaluation and assessment are key to the success of Sweden's decentralised education system

Since a major administrative reform in the early 1990s, Sweden has one of the most decentralised education systems in the world, with its 290 municipalities in charge of organising and operating school services. School leaders and teachers also have wide-reaching autonomy in deciding on study options, teaching materials and methods. The role of the national Government and agencies is to set curriculum goals and monitor outcomes rather than to focus on inputs and processes. In this highly decentralised context, evaluation and assessment are crucial to ensure that professionals get the information and feedback that they need to improve the quality of their work. Evaluation and assessment are also key tools for the central Government to monitor whether national goals for quality and equity in education are being achieved.

The focus on evaluation and assessment has increased as a response to recent challenges

The Swedish education system is facing a number of challenges. Learning outcomes in compulsory school as measured by international student assessments are not as good as they were in the early 2000s. In the last round of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2009), the performance of Swedish 15-year-old students was around the OECD average in reading and mathematics, and below average in science. The relationship between socio-economic background and performance has become stronger, and differences between schools have increased over the past decade. National data has also raised concerns about variations in the quality of education across municipalities. Against this backdrop, the Government has introduced a number of reforms to strengthen quality assurance in education. Prominently among current reforms are an emphasis on high-quality data collection systems, increased external monitoring of schools, earlier student assessment and grading, and follow-up of individual students to prevent failure.

Strengths and challenges

Sweden produces a wealth of high quality data but needs to ensure they are appropriately used for improvement

Key elements of evaluation and assessment are well established in the Swedish education system. All educational activities are organised around a system of *management by objectives*, where curriculum goals are set at the national level and then refined in local work plans for each school, and individual development plans for each student. Each level of the education system – national agencies, municipalities and schools – engage in assessment and evaluation activities. At the central level, there is a high degree of transparency in measuring and publishing results on goal achievement, with the national databases, evaluation reports, school inspection reports and “open comparisons” of school performance all being publicly available. Challenges remain, however, in ensuring that the data collected at different levels are appropriately integrated and used. While the accountability function of evaluation and assessment has received increased attention, the priority is now to ensure that municipalities and schools have the tools, incentives and capacity to use data and feedback to improve their practice.

A high-trust system that fosters professionalism but leads to variability in quality assurance practices

The Swedish approach combines national standard-setting and central test development with a high degree of trust in school professionals to carry out evaluation and assessment. Many evaluation and assessment activities including student assessment, teacher appraisal and school quality reporting are managed internally at the school level. This approach fosters and encourages school leader and teacher professionalism in evaluation and assessment. Municipalities, responsible for evaluating schools in a systematic way, also play a key role. As can be expected from such a decentralised approach, there are large variations in the ways evaluation and assessment are undertaken across the country. While a lot of quality assurance work happens locally and informally, these practices are frequently not documented and there is little evidence as to whether good practice is spread and shared across the system. There is concern about those schools and municipalities that have less capacity to implement effective quality assurance measures.

Sweden has a balanced approach to student assessment, which would be further strengthened by an externally validated measure of student performance

Sweden has a balanced approach to student assessment that captures a wide range of learning dimensions. In the early years of education, assessment is mostly formative in nature and students do not receive grades. Students are being engaged in setting learning goals through individual development plans and develop skills for self- and peer-assessment. There is a strong focus on classroom-based assessments through which teachers collect a variety of evidence on student progress and provide regular feedback to students. National tests at key stages of education are intended to capture a wide range of curriculum goals through performance-based tasks including oral assessment and team projects. The tests are summative in Year 9 and upper secondary school and intend to provide a more standardised and external measure of student achievement. However, as all other types of assessment in Sweden, the national tests are corrected and graded by the

students' own teachers, and the weight of test results in students' grades is determined locally. This raises concerns about inequities in grading. In fact, teachers' marking of the performance-based national tests has shown to be uneven. Possible explanations are that grading criteria are not adequately detailed and that teachers vary in their capacity to score student achievement on performance-based tests. There is a lack of external reference points and moderation to ensure that student assessment in Sweden is reliable and fair.

Teachers benefit from a high level of trust but do not receive sufficient professional feedback

Teachers are generally perceived as trusted professionals, which is reflected in the extensive autonomy that they have in the exercise of their duties. Teacher appraisal in Sweden is not regulated by law and no formal procedures exist to evaluate the performance of permanent teachers. The main form of appraisal is a regular individual development dialogue held between the school leader and individual teachers. There is little guidance provided at the central level on how to appraise teacher performance. There is currently no framework of professional standards to define what constitutes accomplished teaching (even though the National Agency for Education is planning to develop such standards). A unique feature of the teaching profession in Sweden is its individualised pay system, which means that employers / school leaders can potentially make salary decisions contingent on evidence of good performance. In practice, however, salary differences are often determined on the basis of effort and commitment rather than achievement of stated objectives. Overall, teachers have few opportunities for professional feedback. The absence of career progression opportunities further undermines the potential of teacher appraisal.

Internal and external school evaluation are well developed and should become increasingly integrated

Although by international comparison between-school differences in Sweden are low, these have been increasing in recent years. The quality of feedback given to schools and their capacity to improve their own work are thus a key factor for success of the Swedish education system. School evaluation in Sweden is based on the publication of school performance data, national inspections, municipal school evaluation, regular surveys on student and parent satisfaction, and qualitative school self-evaluation. The feedback that schools receive is of high quality and the recently created Schools Inspectorate provides incentives for schools to remediate identified shortcomings. The evaluation capacities of school staff seem well developed thanks to an emphasis on school self-evaluation activities and a range of tools to support it. However, while inspections consider the internal quality work of schools, the integration of internal and external school evaluation could be further strengthened. The recent abolition of compulsory quality reporting holds a risk of being understood by schools as a devaluation of internal quality work. Some municipalities contribute remarkably to the quality of school evaluation but the large variability in the quality of municipal school evaluations is a major concern.

Education system evaluation is well established but data collection and presentation could be further improved

The performance of the education system is monitored via a range of tools, including participation in international assessments, aggregation of data from national assessments, thematic quality evaluations by the Inspectorate and evaluation reports by the National Agency for Education. Results of system-level evaluation are taken seriously and feed into policy development for school improvement. However, it can be questioned whether much of the data collected on student outcomes are appropriate for the purpose of system monitoring. The current reporting of outcomes relies heavily on grades awarded by teachers, but recent studies show that teachers' grading is uneven. This implies that aggregating test results / student grades as measures of school, municipality and system performance is not appropriate. Also, there is emerging evidence that the way the existing data is presented could be improved in order to optimise the usability of this information by local policy makers and stakeholders. There is little analysis at the national level of performance differences among municipalities, despite concerns about the variability of quality procedures across municipalities.

Pointers for future policy development

Develop a strategic plan for an evaluation and assessment framework

There are well-detailed elements of evaluation and assessment in Sweden, but currently they do not link into a coherent framework. A major step towards aligning the existing elements of evaluation and assessment would be to develop a strategic plan or national framework for evaluation and assessment. Such a framework for evaluation and assessment can help provide an overview and reference for all actors working in this field across the education system. The plan should outline the evaluation and assessment requirements at different levels, clarify the responsibilities related to these requirements and map the different tools and centres of expertise that are available in Sweden to optimise practices. It should be complemented by competency descriptions for those who carry evaluation responsibilities and be followed up by specific professional development opportunities.

Further strengthen evaluation capacities at the municipal level

Developing a strategic national plan for evaluation and assessment can go a long way in providing a common national reference framework for educational evaluation across the country. The national plan or framework for evaluation and assessment should stress and support the role of municipal directors of education in school evaluation. The plan should come along with a range of tools that municipal directors of education can use in establishing their local quality improvement system. It is important that the national plan for evaluation and assessment is adaptable for different municipality needs, *i.e.* it should not be an obstacle to well-functioning existing local systems, but it needs to provide the necessary guidance, tools and prescriptive elements for municipalities that do not have sufficient resources or capacity to develop their own quality improvement framework. The Ministry of Education and Research and the National Agency for Education should

also support collaboration across schools and municipalities and consider making greater use of funding incentives to support professional networks related to different aspects of evaluation and assessment.

Increase the reliability of national assessments

Given the key role that national assessments play in the Swedish evaluation and assessment system, it is vital to increase the reliability of these tests. External moderation is essential to ensure consistency, comparability and equity of the teacher-based assessments. There are several options of doing this, such as employing a second grader (a teacher in the same subject) in addition to the students' own teachers, employing professionals for systematic external grading and/or moderation, or introducing a checking procedure by a competent authority or examination board. In any of these options, high quality training for all graders is essential to ensure professional assessment competencies. The design of the assessments could also be further developed so as to contribute to greater reliability. This could be done through exploring ways of using ICT in the assessments and analysing the usefulness of introducing "complex assessments" combining the use of performance-based tasks and some standardised close-ended formats.

Clarify learning goals and provide tools for teachers' assessment practice

In Sweden's goal-oriented education system, clarity in terms of expected levels of student performance is essential. Sweden is currently taking a number of steps to strengthen student assessment via the introduction of a new curriculum with clearer and more concrete goals for student learning. The revision of the curriculum is a good opportunity to strike a good balance between teachers' freedom and equivalence in education across the country. In addition to clarifying goals in the curriculum and syllabi, the National Agency for Education should also consider providing additional tools to support teachers in their assessment practice, such as exemplars illustrating student performance at different levels of achievement and scoring rubrics listing criteria for rating different aspects of performance.

Further build teachers' assessment capacities

Teachers' skills for both summative and formative assessment are key to the success of Sweden's approach to evaluation and assessment. As discussed above, training is particularly important to ensure reliability of teachers' scoring of national tests in Year 9 and upper secondary education. But as classroom-based assessments receive a lot of importance, teachers also need opportunities to improve their own skills for test development. Training for assessment should start with basic assessment literacy, for example understanding different aspects of validity – what different assessments can and cannot reveal about student learning. Formative assessment also needs ongoing attention, especially day-to-day short-cycle assessments including skills for setting up learning situations, developing sophisticated questions, providing timely feedback and helping students develop their own skills for self- and peer-assessment. For teachers in Years 3 and 5, where the tests are used for diagnostic purposes, teachers need skills to interpret results, understand whether further diagnostic testing of some students may be warranted and to identify areas where teaching strategies may need adjustment.

Formalise teacher appraisal as part of a system of teacher registration

The teaching profession would benefit from a system of teacher appraisal for registration at key stages in the teaching career to formalise the principle of advancement on merit, associated with career opportunities for effective teachers. The appraisal system should be based on professional standards for teachers that provide a clear and concise statement or profile of what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. Teacher appraisal for registration could rely on three core instruments, namely classroom observation, self-evaluation and portfolio. There is a case for using a national framework and standard procedures in a process strongly influenced or governed by the teaching profession itself. Evaluators need to be trained to appraise teachers according to the criteria of good teaching and the corresponding levels for registration. It is important that the process takes account of the school context and includes the views of the school leader.

Strengthen teacher appraisal for improvement and link it to professional development and school development

There also should be a stronger emphasis on teacher appraisal for improvement purposes that is fully internal to the school. Such developmental appraisal can be low-key and low-cost, and include self-evaluation, peer evaluation, classroom observation, and structured conversations and regular feedback by the school leader and experienced peers. In order to yield effective results, it should be appropriately linked to professional development which, in turn, needs to be associated with school development if the improvement of teaching practices is to meet the school's needs. Schools are likely to perform well if they associate identified individual needs with the school priorities and manage to develop the corresponding professional development activities.

Articulate school evaluation and teacher appraisal

Given that the systems of school evaluation and teacher appraisal both have the objective of maintaining standards and improving student performance, there are likely to be synergies between the two processes. To achieve the greatest impact, the focus of school evaluation should either be linked to or have an effect on the focus of teacher appraisal. School evaluation should comprise an external validation of the processes in place to organise teacher appraisal, holding the school leader accountable as necessary. In the context of school self-evaluation, it is especially important to ensure the centrality of the evaluation of teaching and learning quality at the school. The quality of teaching and learning should be regarded as a responsibility of groups of teachers or of the school as a whole. In this light, school self-evaluation also needs to assess the appropriateness of teacher appraisal mechanisms and of processes to follow up on the results.

Build on the strength of school-internal quality management approaches

The evaluation and quality assurance of individual schools is at the heart of the Swedish approach to evaluation and assessment. While a range of school evaluation practices are well established, the different processes do not always build on each other. Sweden should further invest in ensuring that external evaluation (inspection) is based on internal self-evaluation. This could help reduce the cost of external evaluation and can also improve the quality of inspection in general. The authorities should continue to provide professional development for internal quality management, make successful models available for schools and stress the importance of quality reporting on teaching and learning progress. It should be clarified that abolishing the compulsory nature of quality reporting serves simply to reduce administrative burden on schools and that self-evaluation will remain a formal expectation. Participatory mechanisms in internal quality work should be further encouraged, increasing the role of self-evaluation as a key input for external evaluation.

Further move towards risk-based and proportional approaches to inspection

While the inspections are a popular and highly professional function in Sweden, they are also a human resource intensive activity. It has been decided that the number of inspections will be increased so that every school is evaluated by national inspections every third year (instead of every sixth year). It would be of interest to analyse the cost-effectiveness of increasing the number of inspections for each school vis-à-vis other investments in school evaluation and school improvement. If internal self-evaluation is well-developed then the external evaluation could focus more on risk-analysis, proportional inspection and stronger follow-up of problematic cases. This would allow distinguishing between schools that need full inspection and those where limited action (or no action at all) would be sufficient.

Support school leaders and strengthen their role in school evaluation

Given the central role of school leadership in Sweden's decentralised system, it is difficult to envisage either effective school evaluation or productive teacher appraisal without strong leadership capacities. Hence, the recruitment, training, appraisal and support of school leaders should be given great importance. Professional development of school leaders as well as middle management staff in schools can help enhance the effectiveness of school evaluation. Better personnel support and more established structures of distributed leadership can help free school leaders of some of their more administrative tasks so that they can focus more time on their educational leadership and quality improvement role. To enhance the effectiveness of school evaluation and connect internal and external processes, it would also be helpful to rely as much as possible on school leaders in the role of peer evaluators for inspections. The active involvement of competent school leaders in the inspection process can make inspections more efficient and at the same time improve the contribution of inspection to school improvement through fostering peer learning and knowledge sharing.

Explore ways to more reliably monitor education outcomes at the system level

Currently, the major tools providing evidence on how the Swedish education system is performing do not offer reliable measures of performance differences between regions/municipalities. The Ministry of Education and Research in partnership with the NAE and key researchers should explore different options to provide a more reliable system monitoring tool. One option would be to develop external monitoring of national assessments. Collaboration with professionals in external marking of tests would also serve to build capacity both centrally and throughout the system. Another option would be to consider introducing a national monitoring sample survey. Such a survey would allow the assessment of a broader range of curriculum content and allow benchmarking of different municipalities on an externally validated measure. Sweden could also evaluate possibilities to heighten the policy relevance of international assessment surveys. For example, increasing the sample size of students participating in international assessments would allow comparison of student performance among selected sub-national groupings.

Improve mobilisation of existing information within the system

Sweden should also encourage greater mobilisation of existing data and information. One option would be to establish a protocol to share data among key stakeholders in system evaluation. This would be of particular relevance in supporting the Inspectorate goal to establish an ‘early warning’ key indicator system, but also for researchers conducting officially commissioned evaluation studies. The National Agency for Education could consult with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions on how it can better report existing information in a format that best fits municipal policy maker needs. There appears to be a demand from policy makers at the municipal level for a systematic reporting of key national information by individual municipality – the availability of information in the central NAE databases reportedly does not suffice and local policy makers would prefer clear reports on key indicators. Such consultation may reveal limitations of existing information, but can feed into future plans to collect data that would better suit the demand from municipalities for quality indicators.